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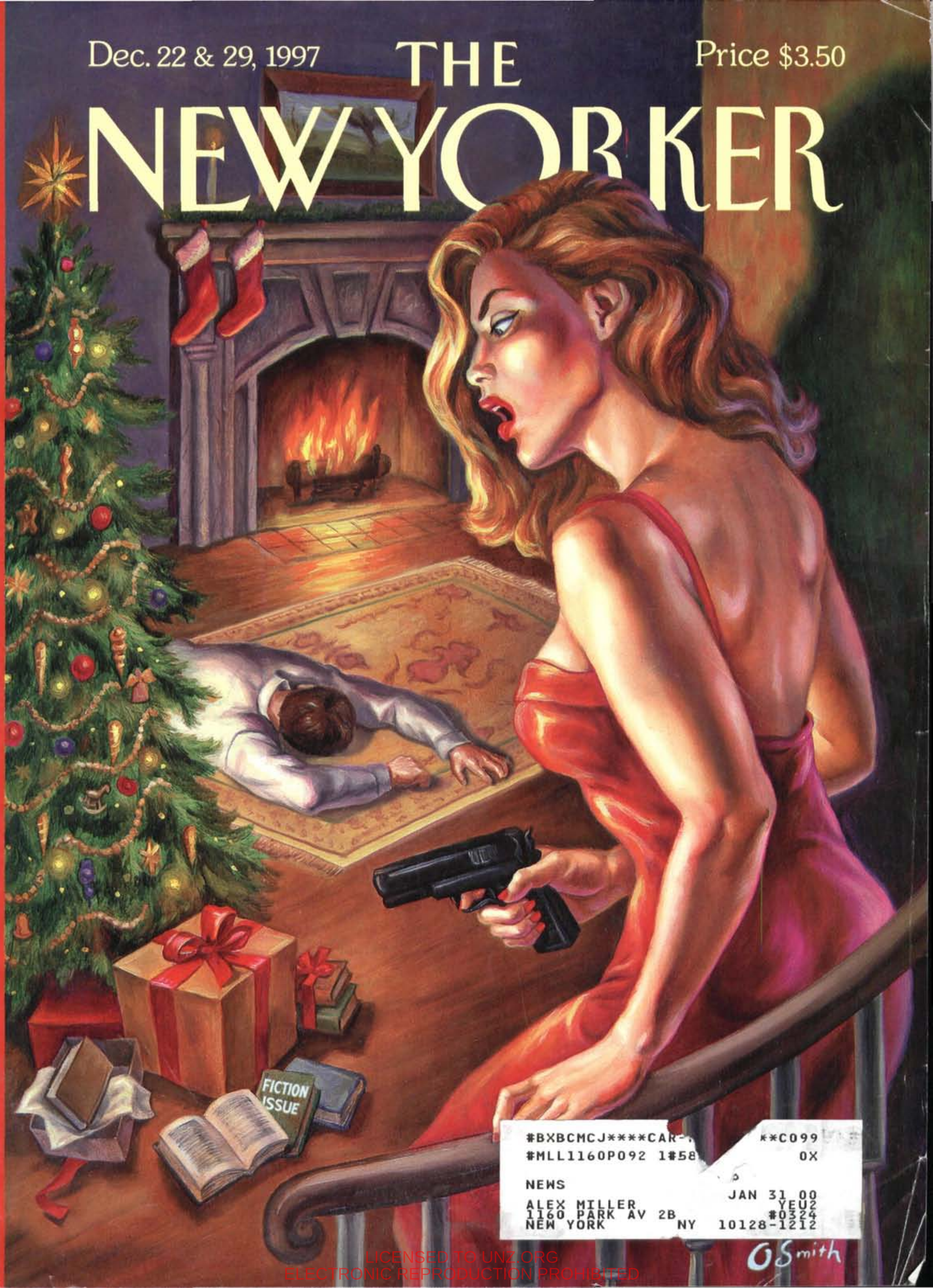
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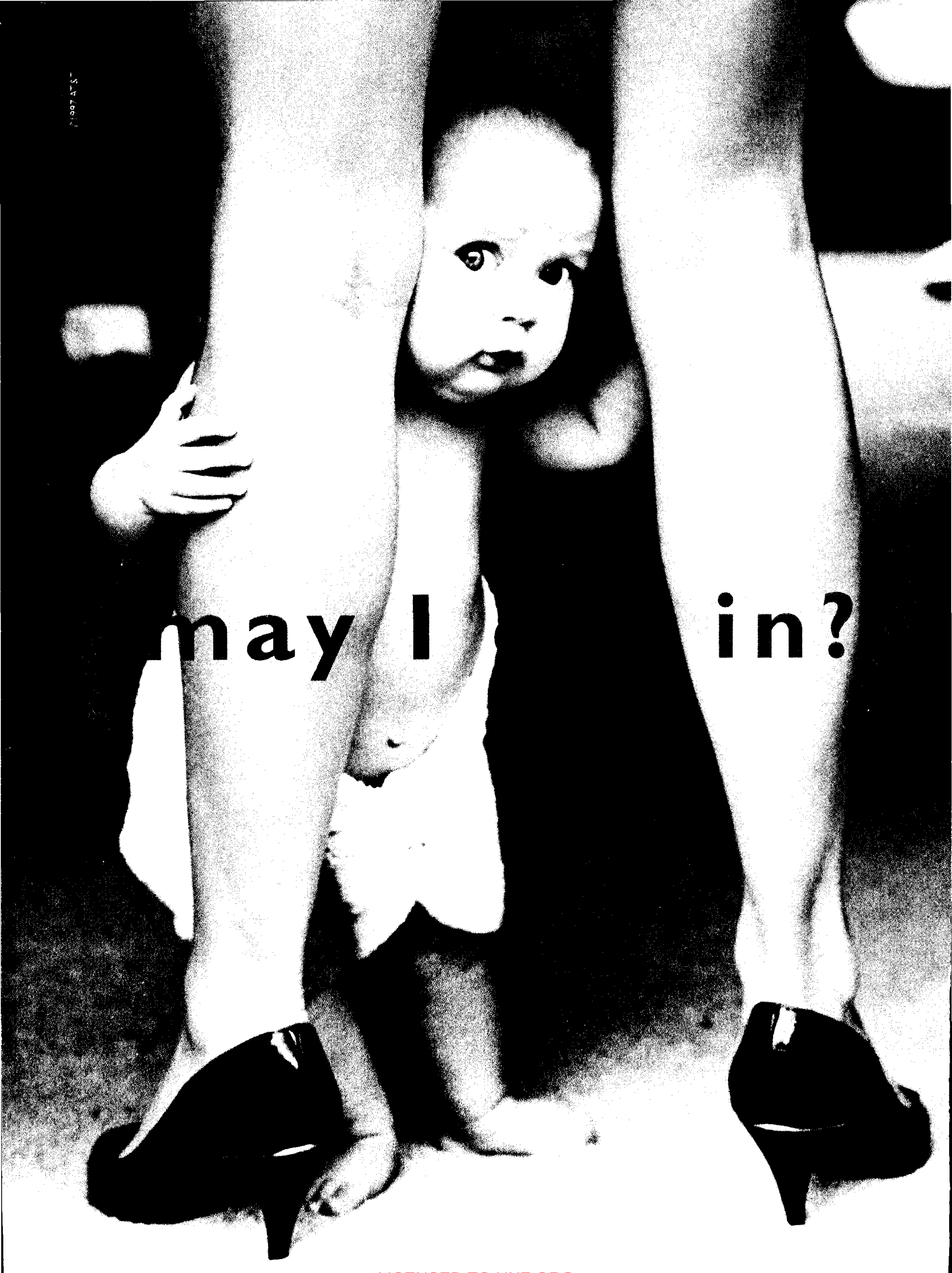

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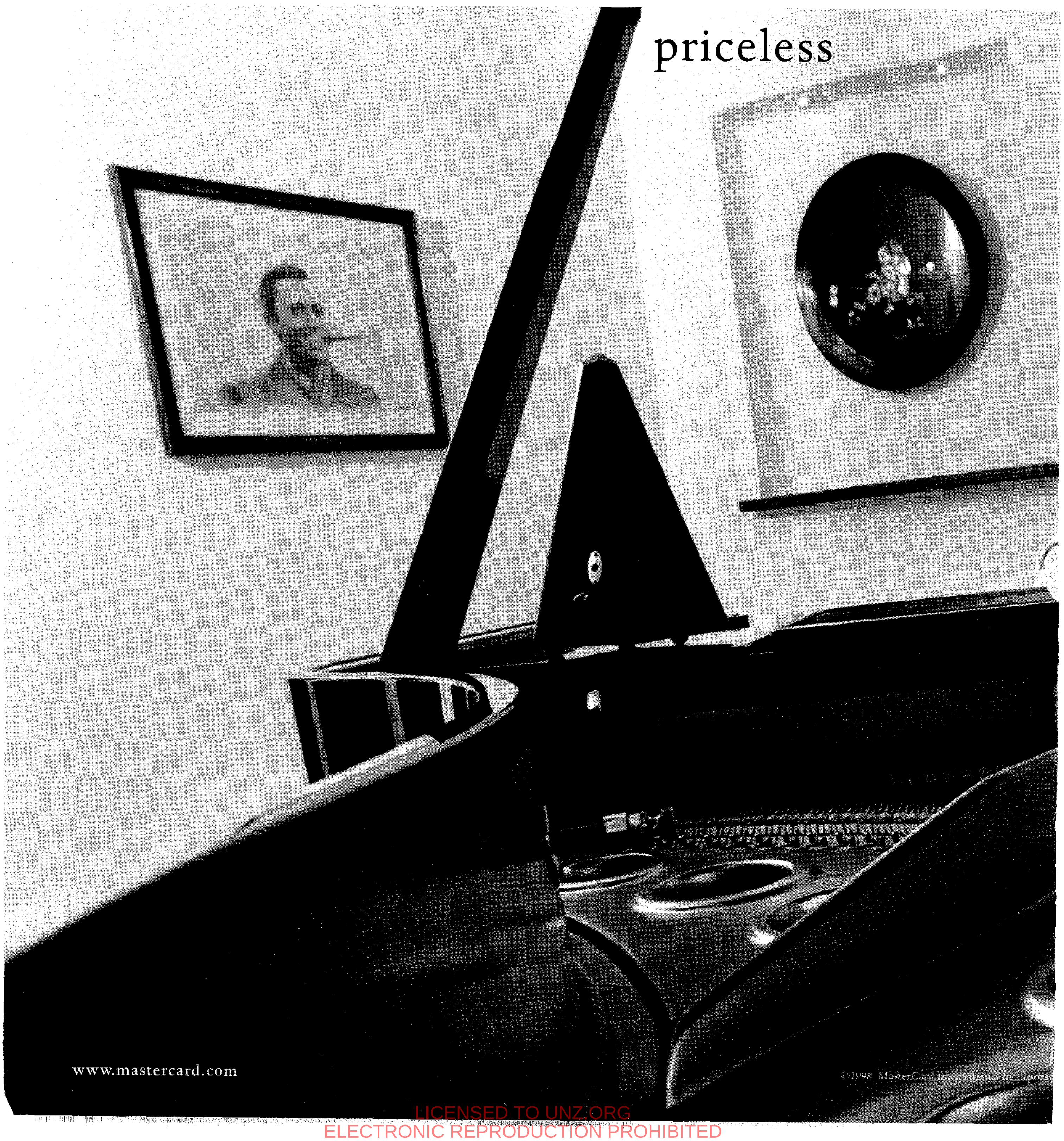

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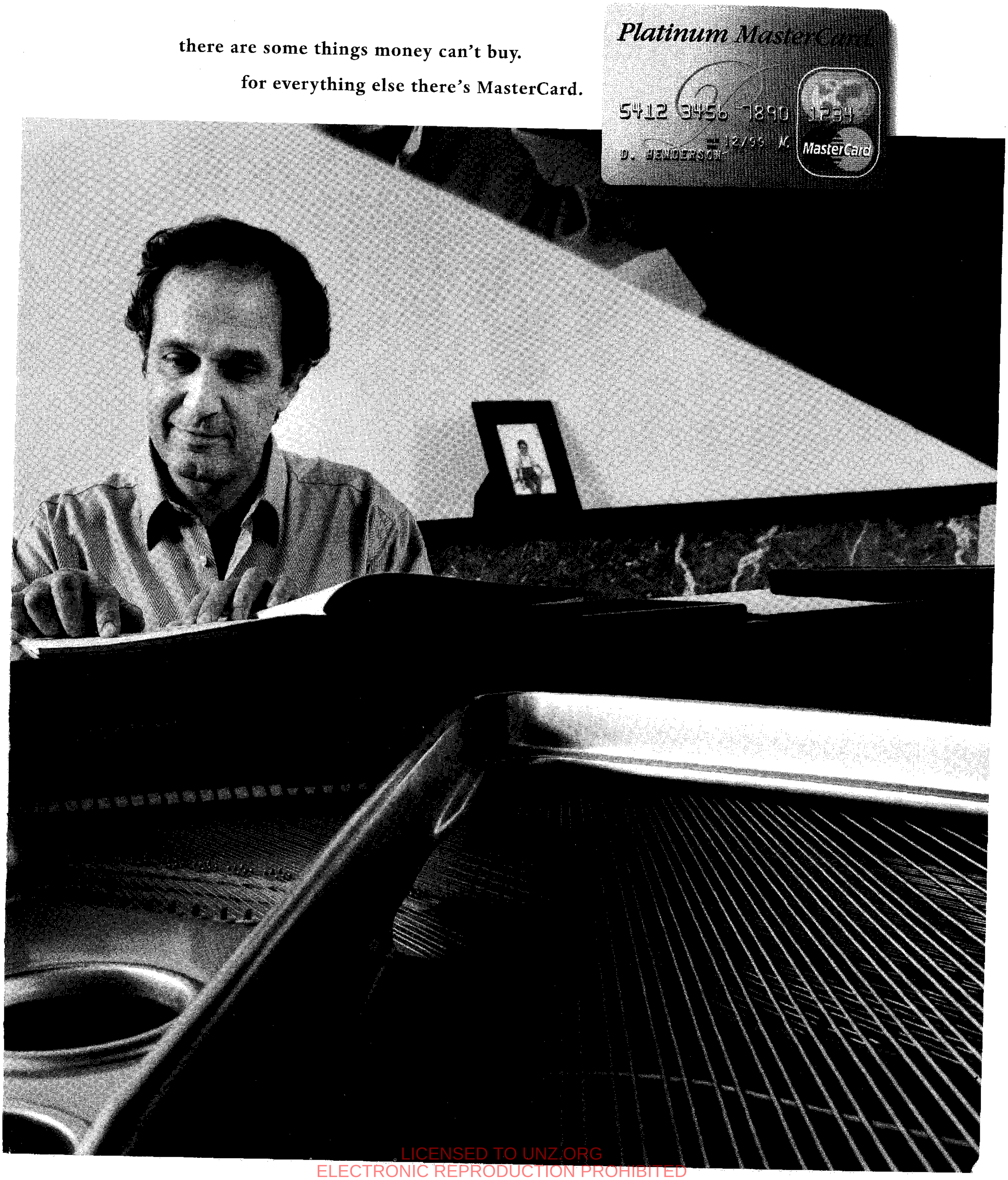
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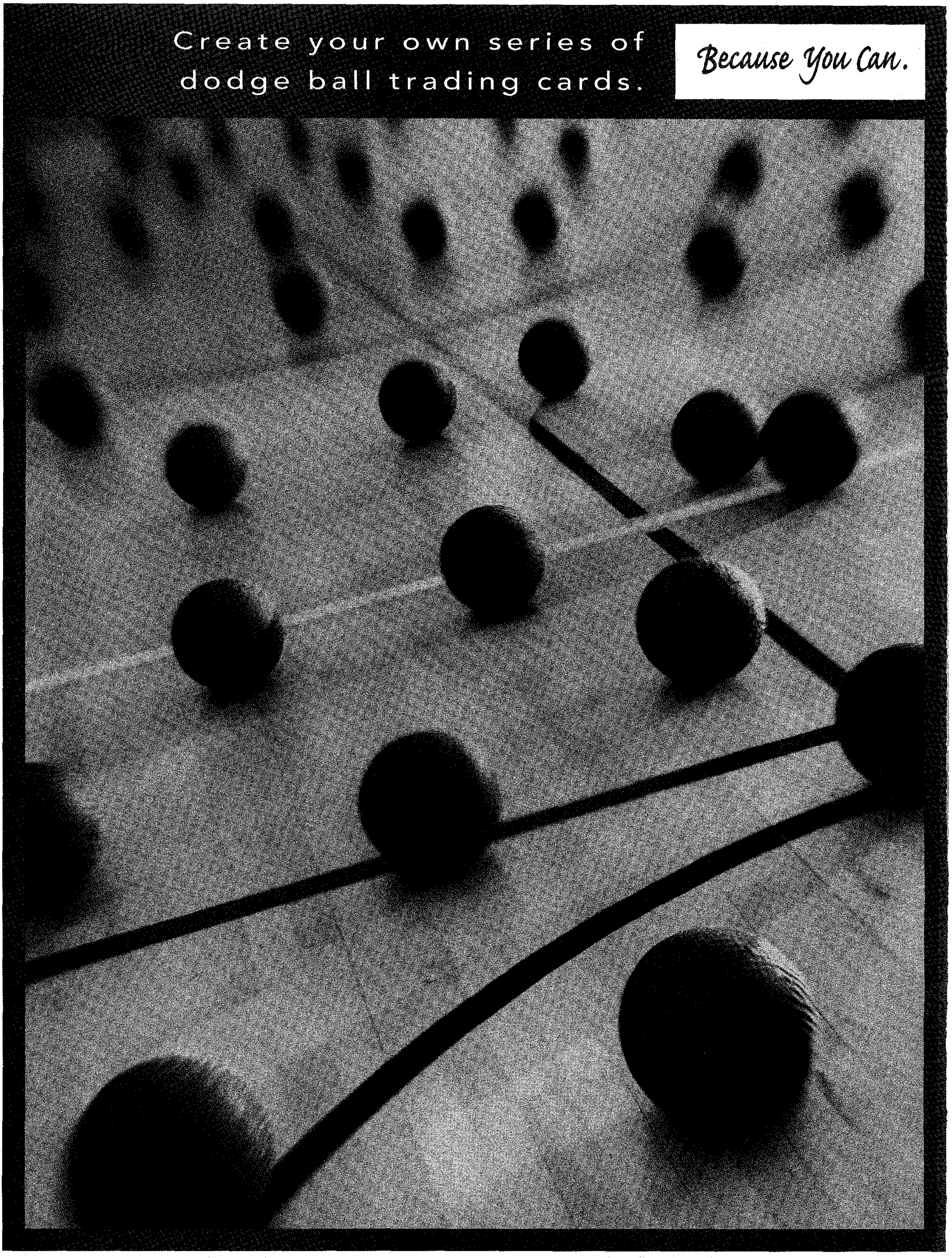
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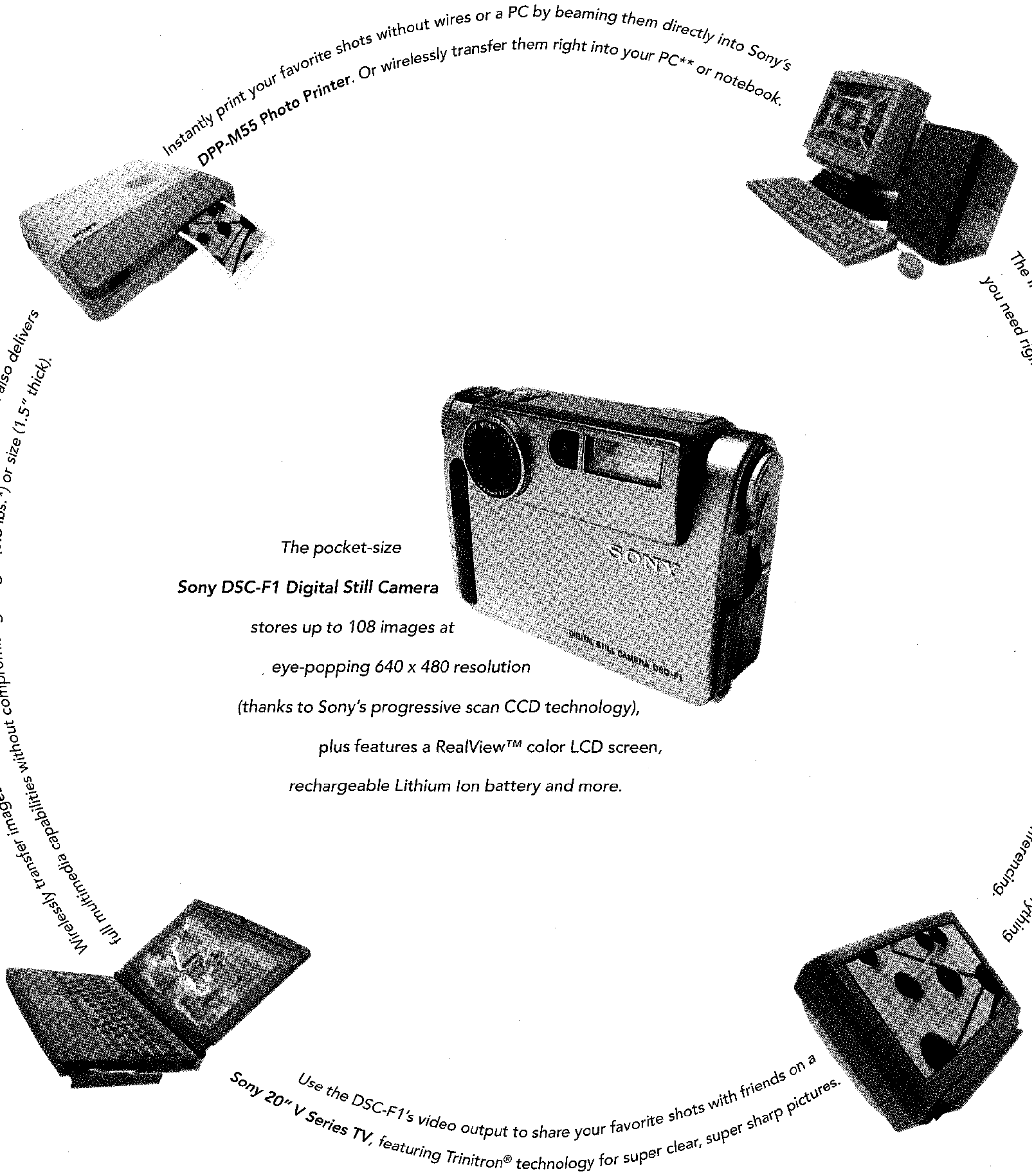

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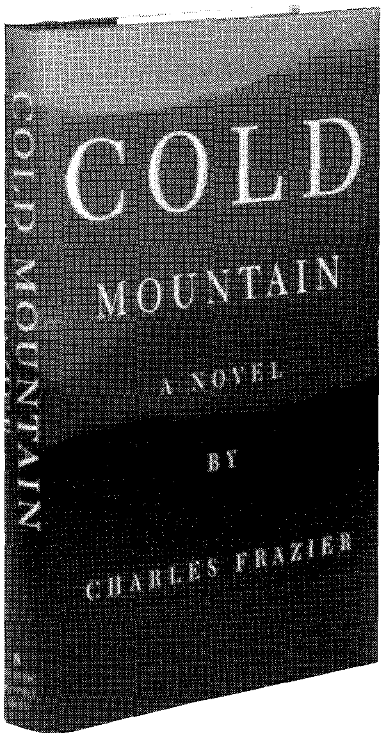

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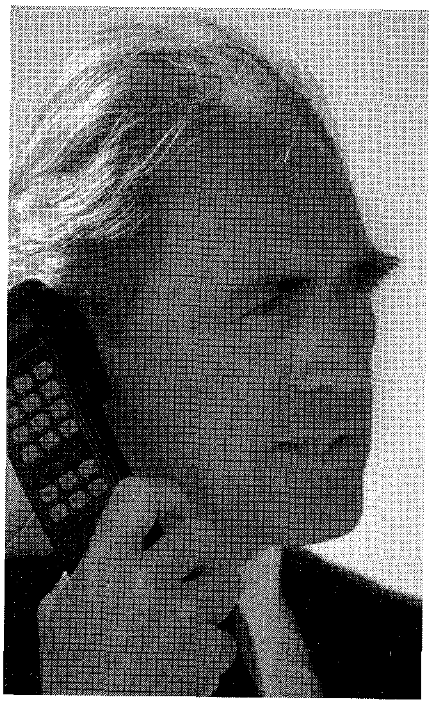

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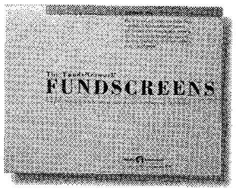

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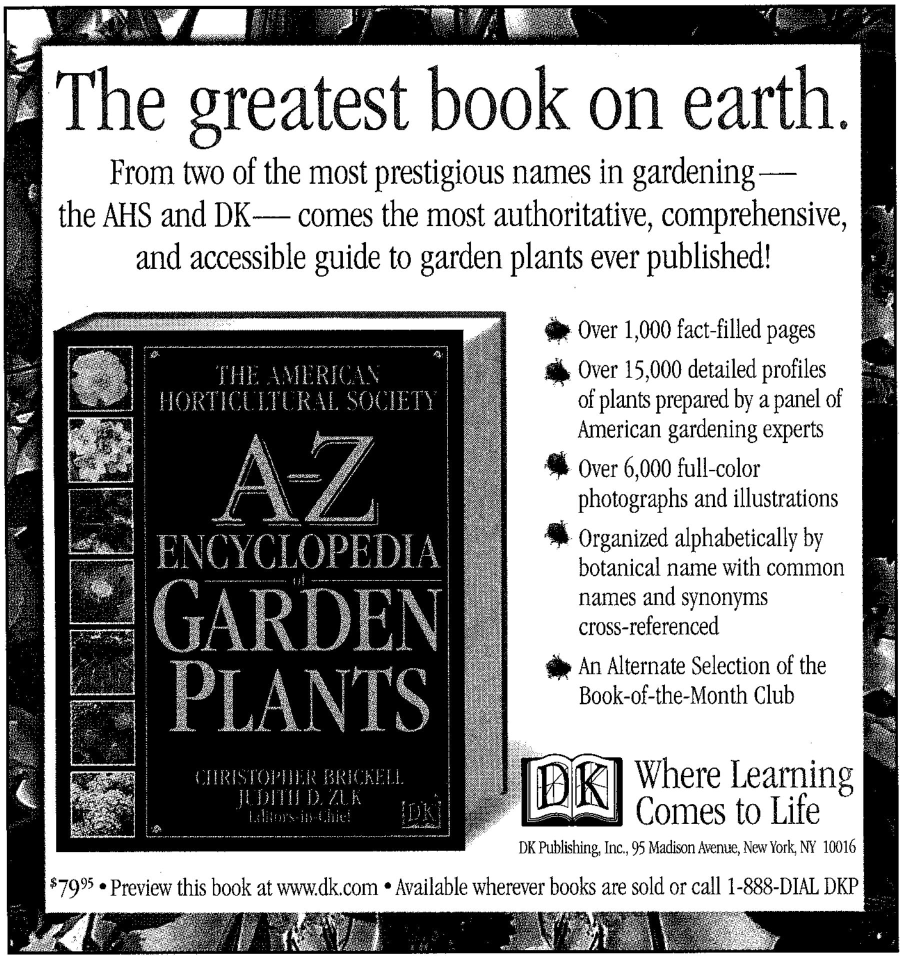

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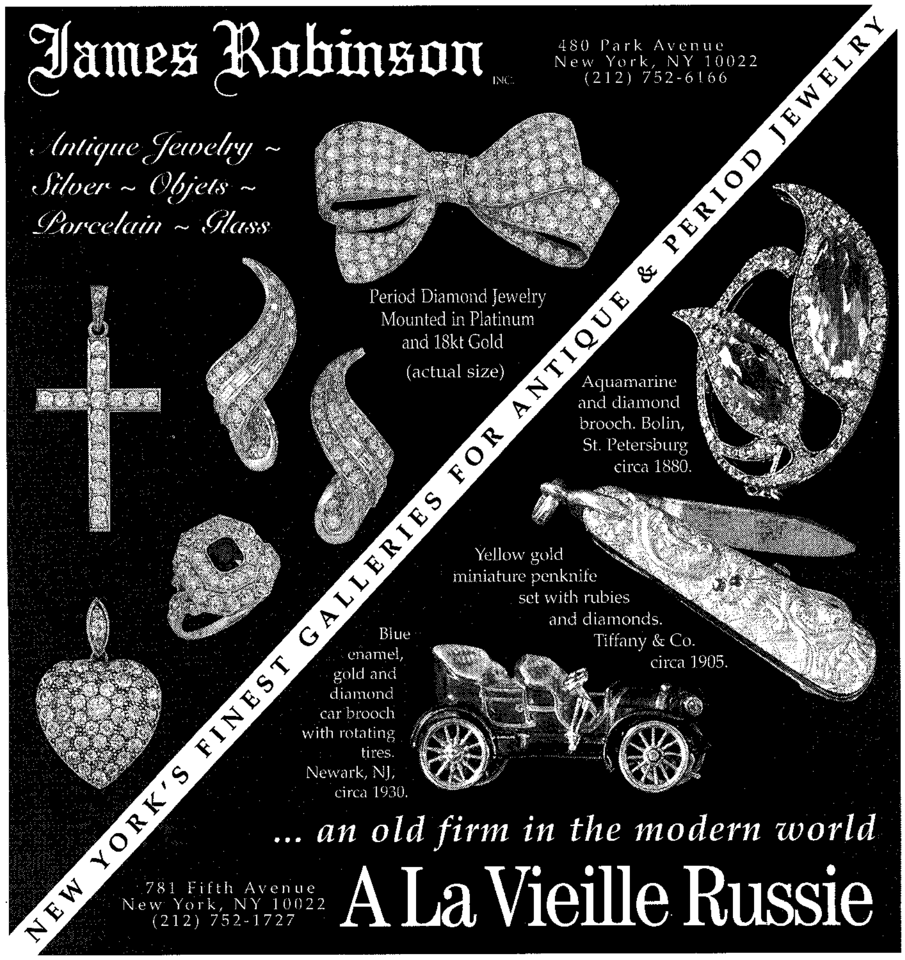

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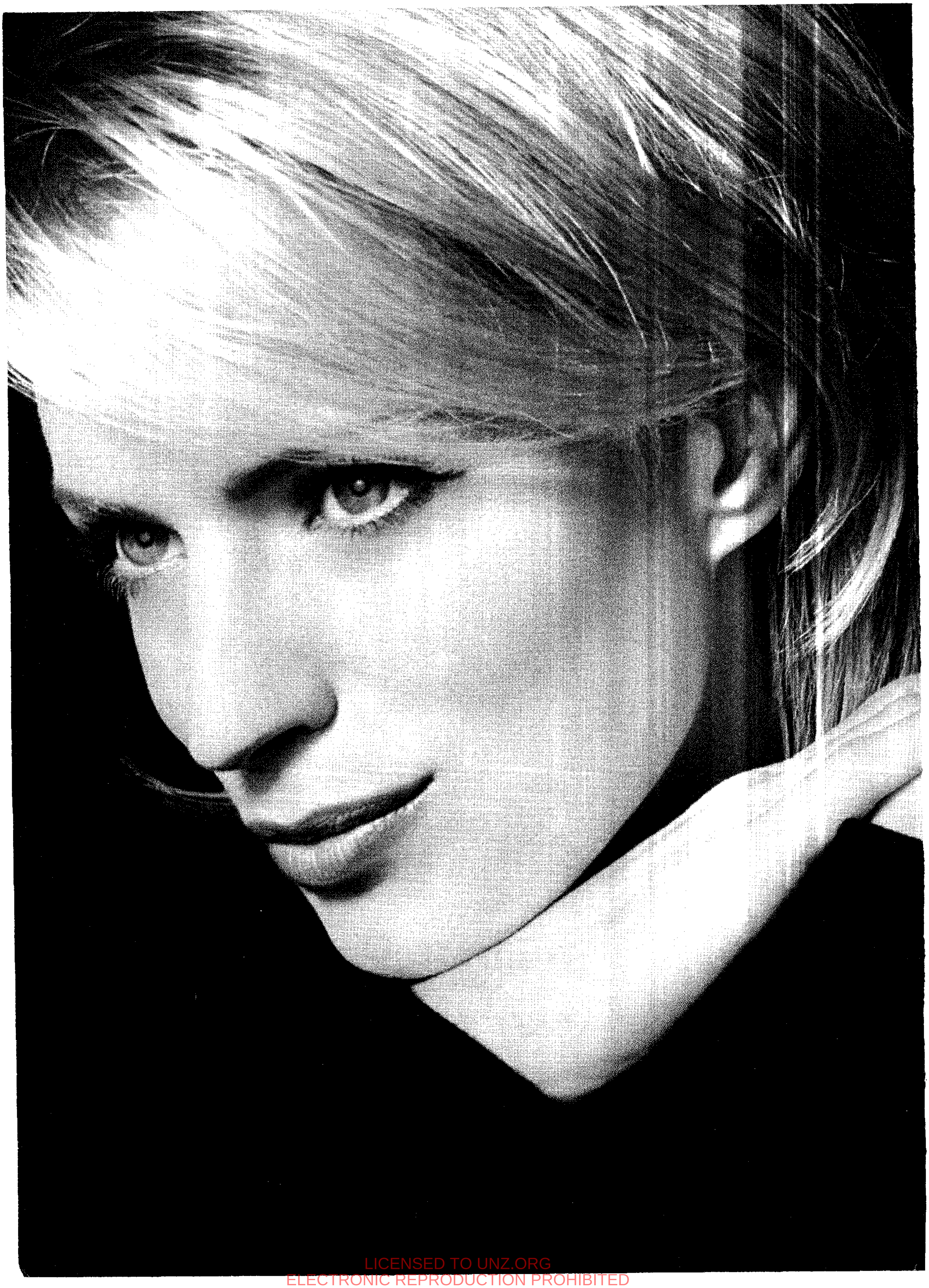

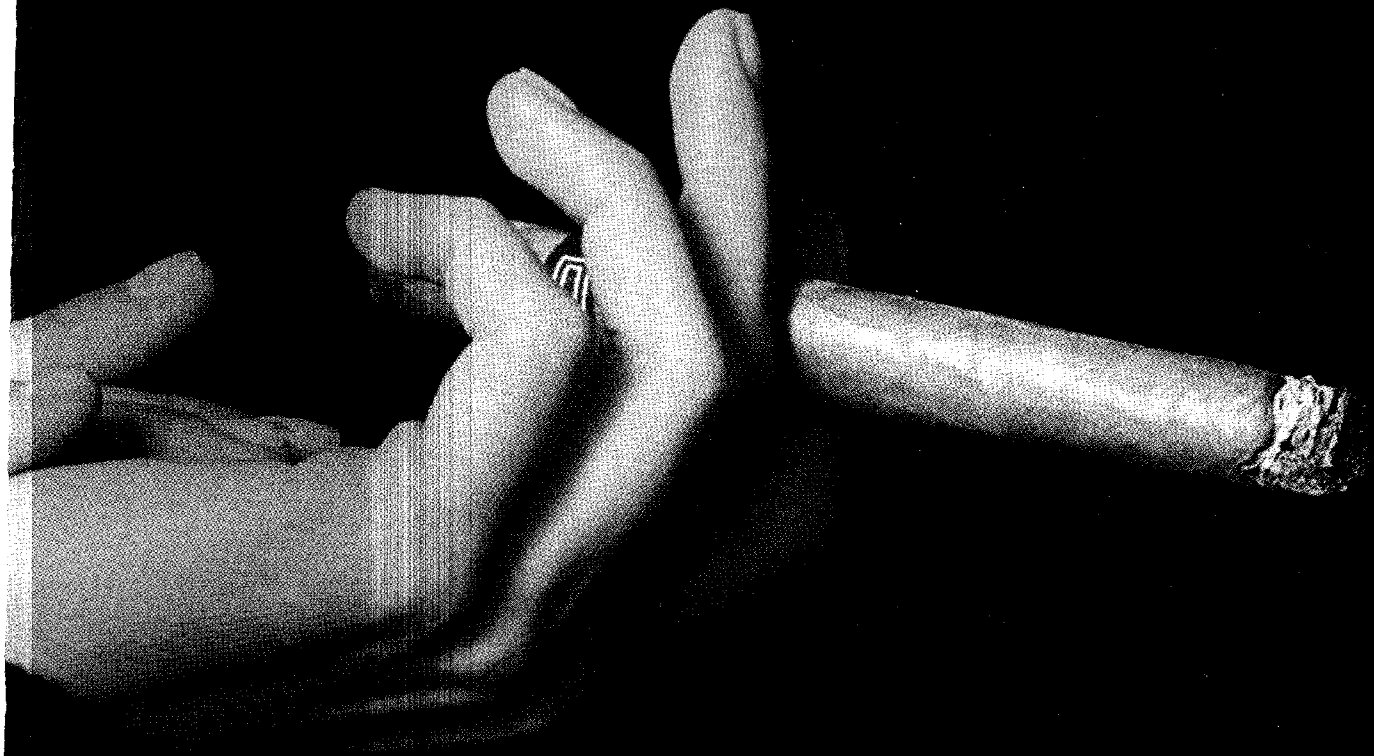

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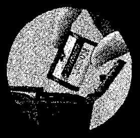

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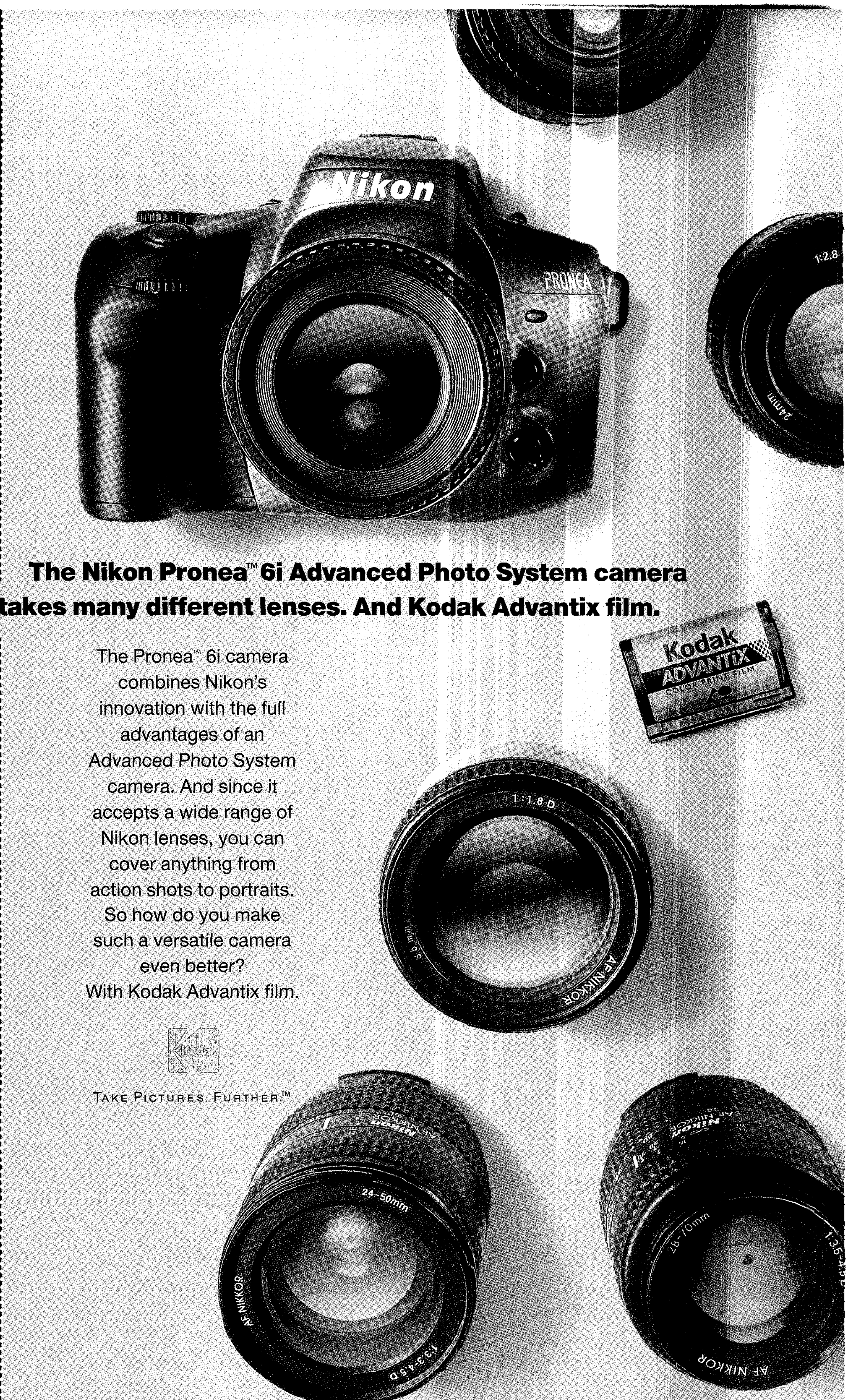
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COMMENT

MIDWINTER WASSAILING

At this time of year, nearly everything is about something other than what it seems to be. Christmas, after all, is the holiday commemorating the birth of Jesus, a birth long acknowledged by many theologians to have taken place at any time of year except the middle of winter. For ages, however, celebrating the holiday was actively discouraged by the Church. It was virtually eliminated in New England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Massachusetts went so far as to outlaw it for twenty-two years: a five-shilling fine was levied for "observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way." In Britain under Cromwell, it was judged to be about sinning, not worship, and was banned for its notorious association with "carnall and sensual delights." (For twelve years, Cromwell's Parliament made a polemical point of sitting on Christmas Day.)

Christmas carolling was particularly suspect. It was a "disgrace," according to one Reverend Henry Bourne, of Newcastle, who in 1725 denounced it with a nudge-nudge-wink-wink-we-know-what's-really-going-on-don't-we? Sure, people might be pretending to be all jolly, singing about little Jesus in the manger, but weren't they really just using the birth of Christ as an excuse for getting drunk, breaking property, and behaving badly—or, as the Reverend lasciviously put it, for "Rioting and Chambering, and Wantonness"?

Some of these examples come from Stephen Nissenbaum's "The Battle for Christmas"—just out in paperback, and an excellent gift for all your friends who happen to be Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, pantheistic, or atheistic celebrators of the Christmas holiday. One of Nissenbaum's theses is the now familiar one that Christmas has been around for a very long time—since well before the Nazarene showed up and his followers took over—but never has the case been made quite so persuasively that the holiday may simply be one of the longest-running office parties in history. Something seems to happen to people at this time of the year, especially if they have the misfortune to live in a northern, cold climate, neatly summed up, perhaps, in what might be seen as a midwinter need for wassailing.

Is Christmas anything more than letting go? Members of the fourth-century Church thought so, because it was they who appropriated the holiday from the Romans. In the eyes of these early Christians, all this winter wassailing was perfectly understandable; it was what people did after working in the fields for months and months. Unfortunately, it had noth-

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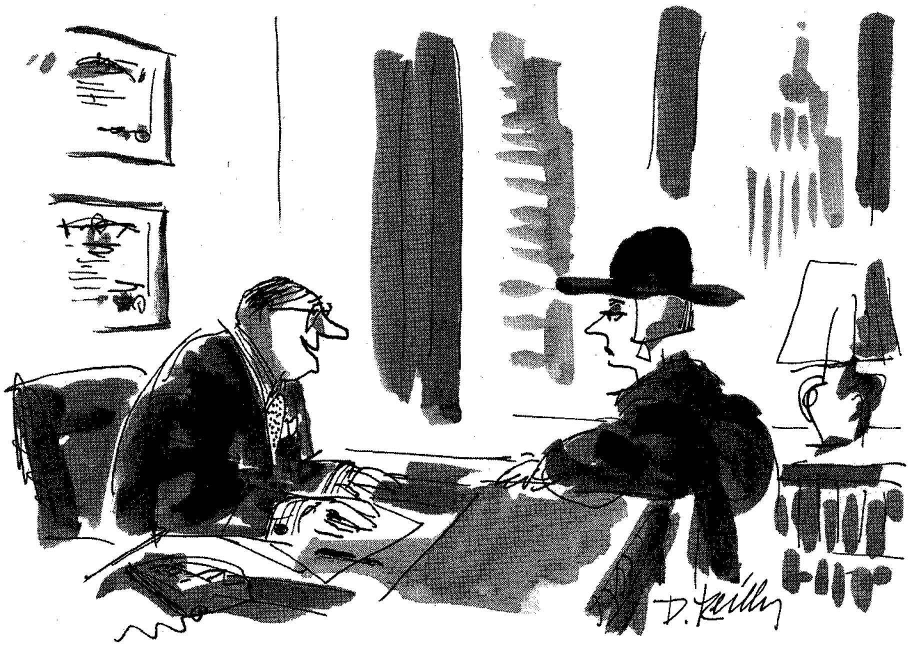


"I've just talked to his lawyer, and he's agreeable—you keep the Hamptons place and he keeps 212."

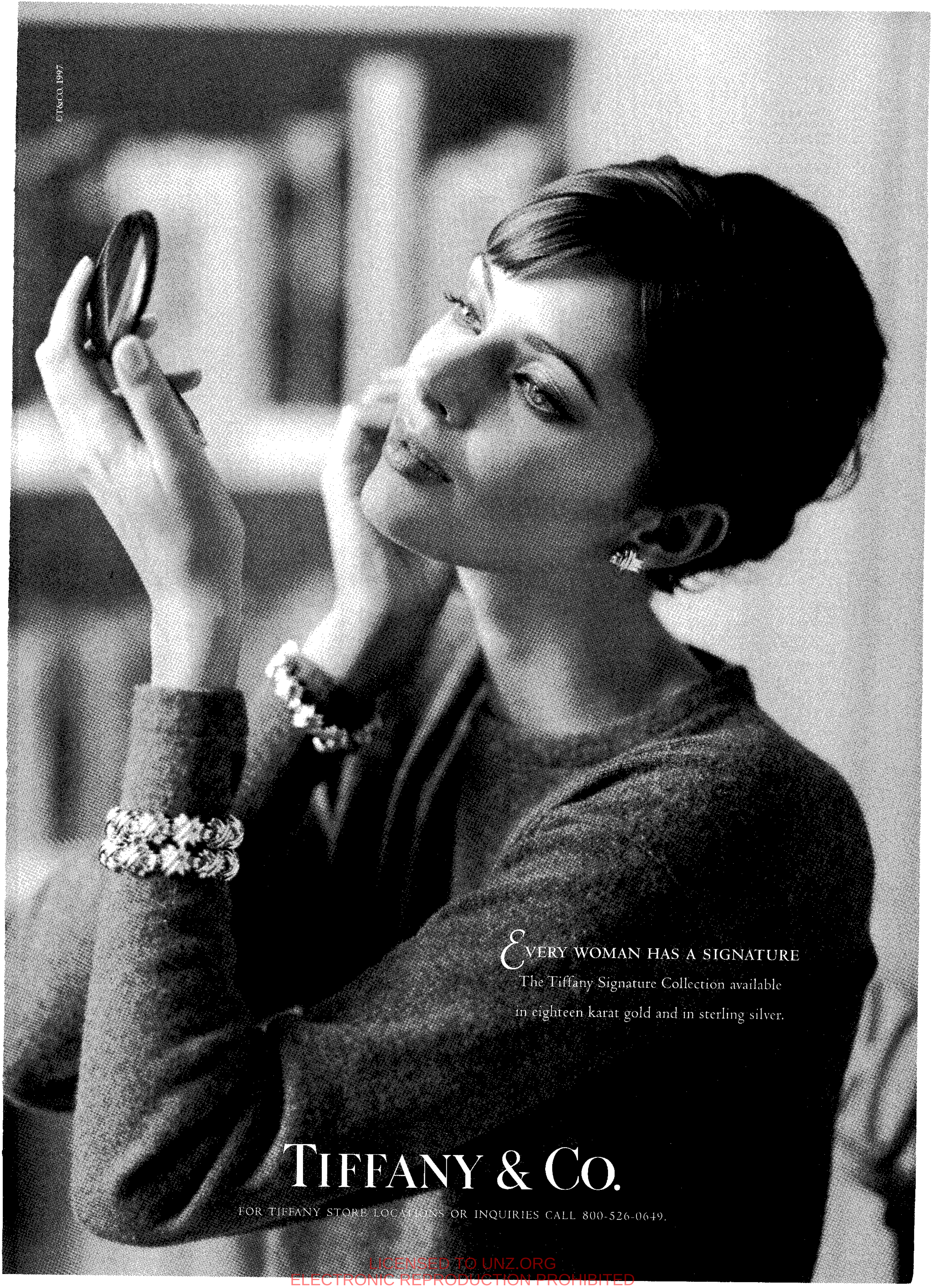
• •

ing to do with God. The geometry of its aspirations wasn't vertical (pointing upward, to Heaven and all that) but horizontal: from earth to—well, earth. The Norse festivals (from which we get the word "Yule") were parties thrown to mark the turn of the year; the Roman Saturnalia festivals (from which we get December twenty-fifth as a holiday) were parties thrown to mark the end of days' getting shorter and the start of days' getting longer. The early Christmases were celebrations of the smell of things, the gradations of the seasons, the properties of our planet, and the lustful, appetite-driven, pleasure-seeking behavior it invites. Above all, they were celebrations of belonging.

THE fiction in this issue is implicitly informed by questions of belonging. Each story, in one way or another, arises out of the most important relationship of all—the relationship with the family. In an ambitious story of family origins, Jeffrey Eugenides describes the family as always being in us, a militant and capricious gene that we neither understand nor control. In Alice Munro's tale, the family is the essential presence—the thing that never leaves you, even if you find that you have to leave it. In the hands of both Nick Hornby and George Saunders, the family is treated much more indirectly (and as comedy), but it is still the fundamental unit: problematic, dysfunctional, ever-present.

The question of belonging is approached in a different fashion in the issue's nonfiction. Frank McCourt (in The Talk of the Town) recalls the misery of a solitary Christmas in the company of a curmudgeonly widow and her gaga son. Ken Kesey offers up the lessons learned by spending Christmas among the homeless and the down-and-out. We see in the hands of John Updike and Lorrie Moore the weight of Christmas, even if their Christmases are fundamentally failures: the gift wasn't the one hoped for, the meal wasn't the most appropriate.

These stories (it should be admitted) were written in response to an invitation for memories of miserable Christmases. Why? Because literature is always best when it is celebrating its subject darkly. (Would "Lear" be "Lear" if Goneril had said, "Sure, Dad, stick around for a while—let me look after you?") And because it is often by describing the thing lost—a family, a moment of happiness, a child, a father—that we understand the full weight of what we had. And that's a fundamental Christmas concept, even if it's not necessarily a Christian one—even if it doesn't entirely appear to be what it is. —BILL BUFORD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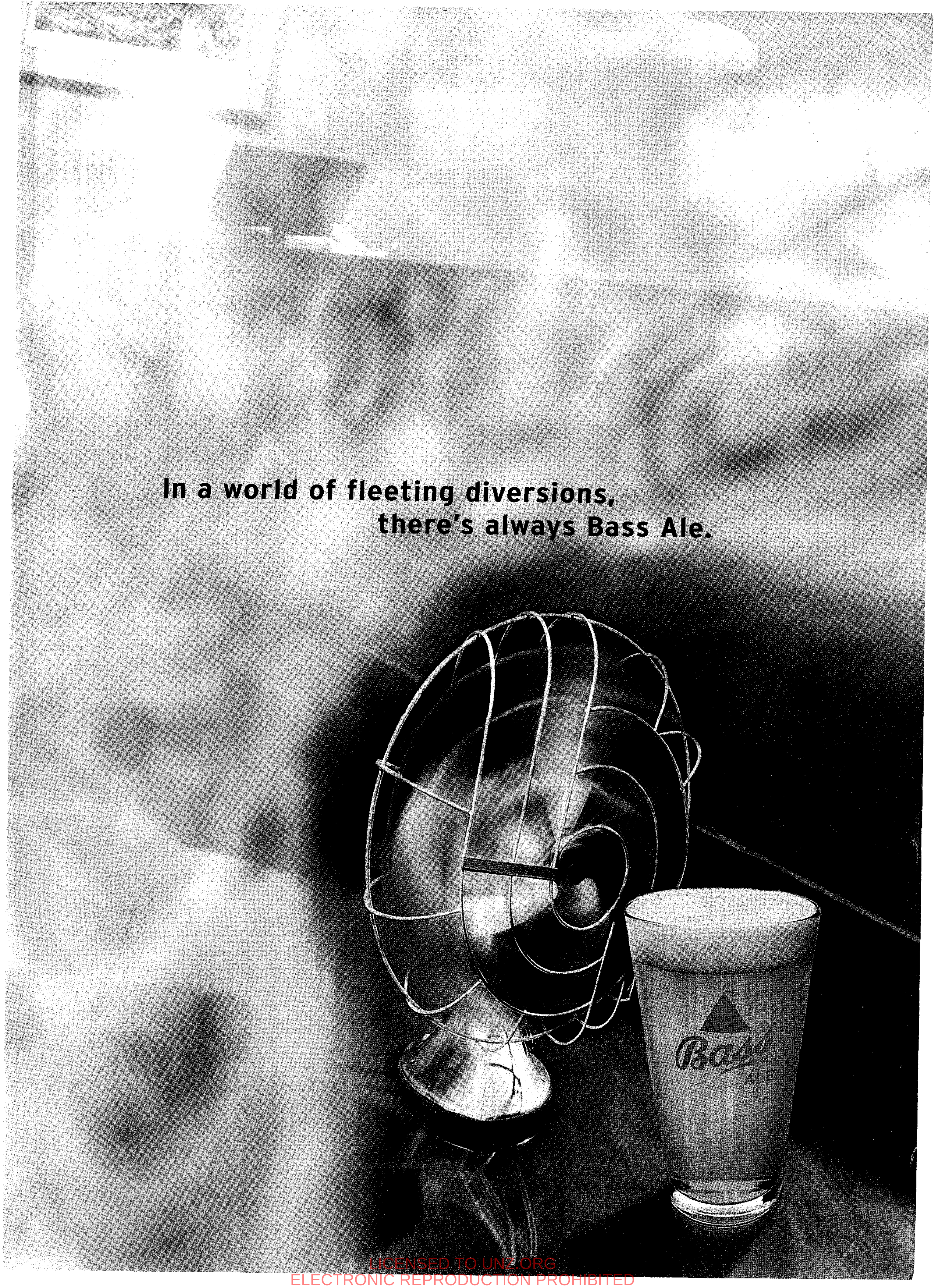
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Introduction and Notes by Bernard Knox

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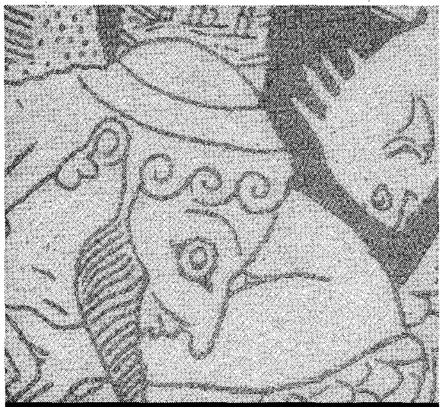


THE MAIL

A JERUSALEM TRIPTYCH

Lawrence Weschler, in his review of my book "The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism" ("Mayhem and Monotheism," November 24th), writes, "Given that the Nazi genocide established the necessity for a Jewish homeland, [Schwartz] seems to suggest, why did it have to be in Palestine rather than, say, Bavaria or the Ruhr Valley?" I would not draw that inference from my book, which does not address Zionism. I noted that in Israel three peoples lay claim to the same piece of land and that "each believes its right to that land is historical, ancient, and divine." Far from advocating that some should be elsewhere, I hope that they will be able to share that space in peace. The proximity of the wall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem to the El-Aksa Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a haunting reminder of the brotherhood of their peoples, just as the armed soldiers patrolling the sacred space are an equally haunting reminder of humanity's failure to rise to the challenge of peace that such sacredness, at its best, invites.

Regina Schwartz
Director, Institute of
Religion, Ethics, and Violence
Northwestern University
Evanston, Ill.

THE MIND OF A MURDERER

Mimi Swartz's elegy on the tragic life and death of John Salvi, the man who killed two abortion-clinic staff members in December of 1994 ("Family Secret," November 17th), gives us a renewed reason to examine rhetoric that can provoke people like Salvi to kill. Operation Rescue protests, which Salvi attended, feature chants calling health-care workers "baby killers," "murderers," and "sinners." Extreme anti-choice zealots, like Salvi, often defend their violent acts as "justifiable homicide"—an explanation which has not disappeared from mainstream America. Last March, a New York City elected official advocated legislation that would mandate the execution of doctors who performed a particular method of late-term abortion. And some respected leaders of the Catholic Church issued only backhanded expressions of regret in the aftermath of Salvi's murder spree, making statements like "You cannot prevent killing by killing."

It is sad that John Salvi's parents lost a child, but so did the families of the victims, Leanne Nichols and Shannon Lowney. It's important to remember that Salvi's actions can only have been encouraged by the forces he heard around him.

Alexander C. Sanger
President, Planned
Parenthood of New York City
New York City

John Salvi's story is tragic because his parents didn't know enough to seek help for him. It would have been doubly tragic if they had sought help and failed to get it—a likely result under our present laws. Since Salvi, like approximately half of all people with schizophrenia, apparently had little insight into his disease or his need for medication, he would not have sought help voluntarily. And in most states he could not have been treated involuntarily until he had demonstrated that he was a danger to himself or others. Until our laws are made consonant with modern psychiatric knowledge, we will continue to have a regular series of tragedies like Salvi's.

E. Fuller Torrey, M.D.
Bethesda, Md.

STREET THEATRE

John Lahr's musings on David Mamet's fondness for four-letter words (in "Fortress Mamet," November 17th) brought to mind a joke I heard in a Chicago theatre lobby years ago:

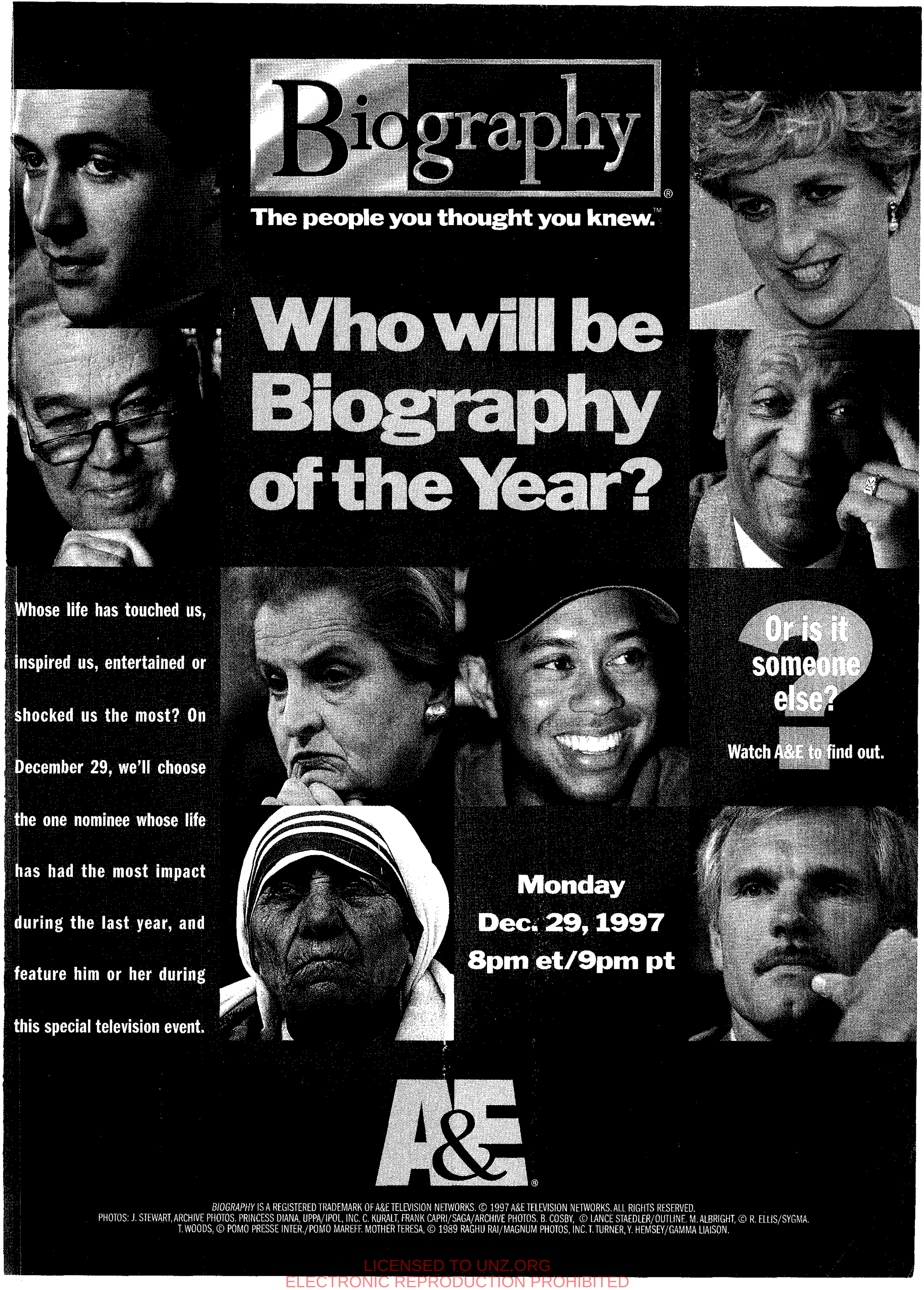
A bum goes up to a guy on Michigan Avenue and says, "Got any spare change?"

Guy: "'Neither a borrower nor a lender be'—Shakespeare."

Bum: "'Fuck you'—Mamet."

Roger Ebert
Chicago, Ill.

Letters should be as brief as possible, and sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number to "The Mail," The New Yorker, 20 West 43rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036. They may be edited for length and clarity.



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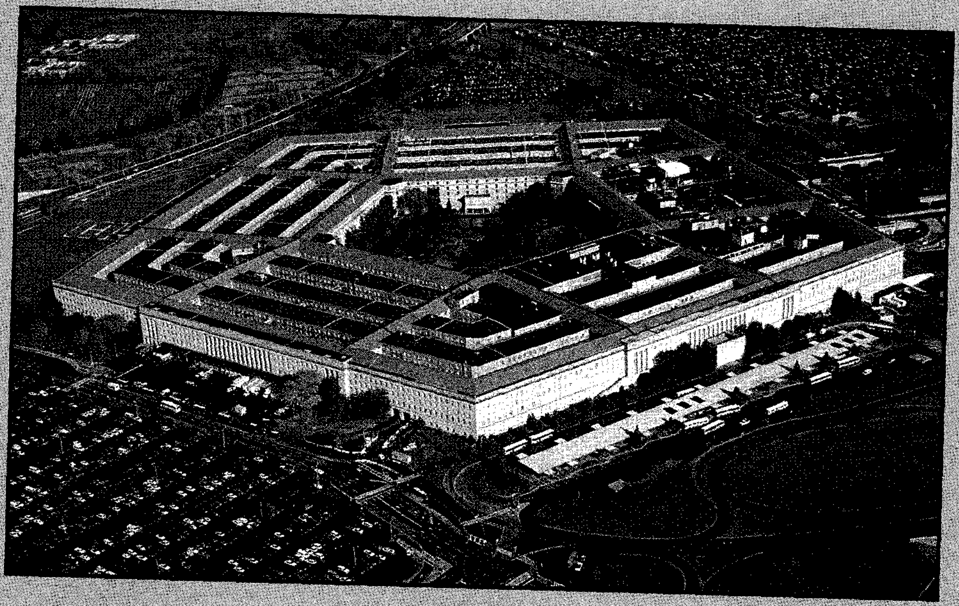

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

(Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

The Capeman—A musical by Paul Simon and Derek Walcott, directed and choreographed by Mark Morris. In previews. (Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 307-4100.)

Goose-Pimples—Scott Elliott directs the New Group's season opener, a 1981 comedy by Mike Leigh. Preview on Dec. 17. Opens Dec. 18 at 7. (Judith Anderson, 422 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

June Moon—The Drama Dept.'s encore production of Ring Lardner and George S. Kaufman's 1929 comedy, about a Tin Pan Alley songwriter. Mark Nelson is the director. Previews begin Dec. 18. (Variety Arts, Third Ave. at 14th St. 239-6200.)

Ragtime—Terrence McNally (book) and Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens (score) have adapted E. L. Doctorow's 1975 novel for the stage. Frank Galati is the director. Previews begin Dec. 26. (Ford Center for the Performing Arts, 213 W. 42nd St. 307-4100.)

The School for Scandal—A Pearl Theatre Company staging of Sheridan's 1777 comedy of manners. In previews through Dec. 28. Opens Dec. 29 at 7. (80 St. Marks Pl. 598-9802.)

The Show Goes On—Lyricist-librettist Tom Jones and composer Harvey Schmidt star in a revue of their songs. Opens Dec. 17 at 8. (Theatre at St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 935-5820.)

The Yeomen of the Guard—Presented by the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players. Opens Dec. 26 at 8 and continues through Jan. 4 (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 864-5400.)

OPENED RECENTLY

The Alien Comic's Christmas Spectacular—Featuring Amy Sedaris, White Knuckle Sandwich, the Duelling Bankheads, and "Alien Comic" Tom Murrin. Dec. 19-20 at 10. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 475-7710.)

Bashevis: Tales of I. B. Singer—David Margulies stars in a performance of three of the author's short stories adapted for the stage. (Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 354-2220.)

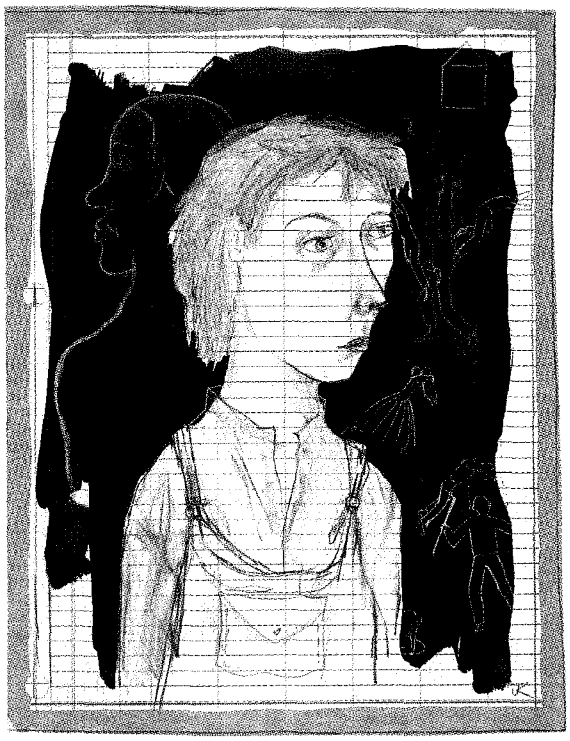
Brides of the Moon—This time around, the Five Lesbian Brothers play the world's first all-female team of astronauts, who have been shot into space in order to marry the lonely male inhabitants of the Pygo Moon System. After saving their ship with some technical finagling involving a microwave, they decide they'd rather make a detour to a gay resort located in the Harvey Milky Way. All five women are hilarious in dual roles, but Peg Healey stands out, as a brilliant housewife-astrophysicist whose brain has been nearly destroyed by motivational tapes and as the space monkey Dai Dai. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 460-5475. Closes Dec. 28.)

Christmas at the Ivanovs'—The Classic Stage Company and Arden Party's co-staging of Alexander Vvedensky's 1938 black comedy. Directed by Karen Coonrod. (C.S.C., 136 E. 13th St. 677-4210. Closes Jan. 4.)

Cyrano de Bergerac—Frank Langella directs, and dons the schnozz in, his own adaptation of Rostand's romantic drama, from a translation by Brian Hooker. (Roundabout, Broadway at 45th St. 869-8400.)

Defying Gravity—Take a step back from Jane Anderson's impressionistic play about the 1986 Challenger disaster and you see a lovely rendering of man's desire to be part of something infinite. This is a thoughtful, affecting work, with fine performances by everyone in the cast. Michael Wilson directed, with a deft touch. (American Place, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200.)

The Diary of Anne Frank—This revival of the 1955 play by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett aims for realism and historical scrupulousness: the new adaptation, by Wendy Kesselman, dispenses with the creaky devices of the original and adds material that Anne's father, Otto Frank, edited out of the first published version of the diary. There may be much to admire about the production—theatrically, it's an improvement, and the cast, under the direction of James Lapine, is generally fine—but the play's realism is also its fundamental flaw: its attempt to recreate Anne Frank's experience literally, to show us "what it was like," represents a failure of imagination. Accuracy is not a substitute for truth—and one of the truths we take away from Anne's diary is that we *can't* know what it was like. With George Hearn, Sophie Hayden, Harris Yulin, Austin Pendleton, and, as Anne, Natalie Portman, who looks the part but has a stiff and studied girlishness. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/15/97.) (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)



The Drama Dept.'s version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

JULIA KUHL

The Field of Mars—A production inspired by Tacitus, in which the audience wanders through the set as the action progresses. Staged by Gale Gates et al. (37 Main St., Brooklyn. 718-522-4597. Closes Dec. 20.)

I'm Still Here . . . Damn It!—A mean little cocktail from Sandra Bernhard, composed of equal parts stand-up, performance art, cabaret, world-weariness, and dish. Although the cracks in the plaster holding her many selves together sometimes reveal an unexpected vulnerability and gentleness, she maintains complete control from her spike-heeled perch. (Westbeth Theatre Center. 151 Bank St. 307-7171.)

The Irish . . . and How They Got That Way—A good-natured if somewhat choppy revue by Frank McCourt, performed by a versatile and charming cast of six singers and musicians. Deftly directed by Charlotte Moore. (Chelsea Playhouse, 125 W. 22nd St. 727-2737. Closes Jan. 4.)

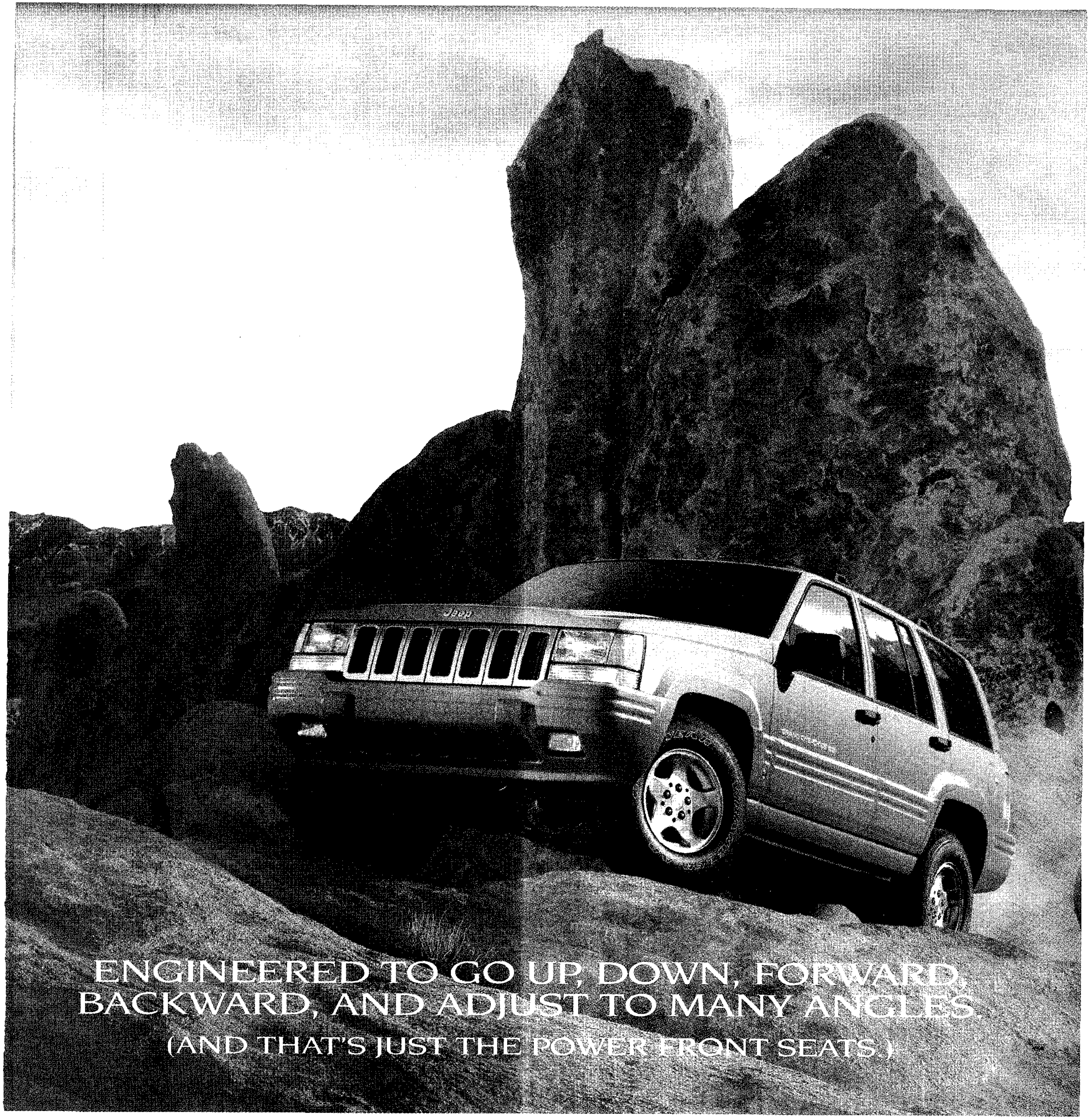
Ivanov—Because American actors have trouble inhaling the nihilistic ozone of Chekhov, Gerald Gutierrez's production looks authentic but doesn't feel it. Kevin Kline powerfully conveys the honesty and intelligence of the title character but not his raw, nervy, spiritually deracinated mood of decline. (12/1/97) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

Jackie—A complete delight. The playwright, Gip Hoppe, may be satirizing what we think we know about the former First Lady, but he does it with such heart and high comedy that you may not want to leave the theatre. Margaret Colin leads the gifted cast, and Hoppe, who also directed, is aided and abetted in this zaniness by the set designer David Gallo. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

The Last Session—A musical by Steve Schalchlin (music and lyrics) and Jim Brochu (book), about an AIDS-afflicted songwriter's final studio work. (47th Street Theatre, 304 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

The Lion King—The director Julie Taymor has created a theatrical event far more textured and original than the animated film, submerging the audience in a mythic universe; it's like being in a dream awake. The show's high visual style, however, is in sharp contrast to its low verbal one. Garth Fagan is the choreographer. (11/24/97) (New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 307-4100.)

Major Barbara—Shaw's often maligned disquisition on faith, money, and the good uses of hypocrisy has received a spectacular, fast,



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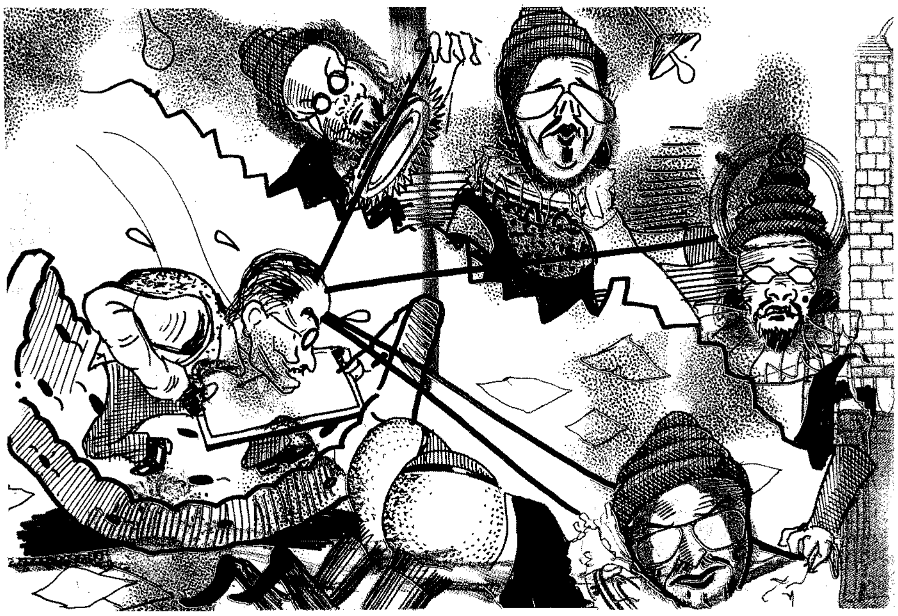
and funny revival at the hands of Tony Walton, the director and designer of this Irish Repertory Theatre production. The uniformly wonderful cast includes Melissa Errico, Boyd Gaines, Jack Ryland, and Rob Sedgwick. (132 W. 22nd St. 727-2737. Closes Jan. 4.)

Marc Salem's Mindgames—The mind reader shows off his telepathic feats. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.)

Mojo—Two parts Mamet, one part Pinter, and a smattering of Shepard, mixed together by the young Briton Jez Butterworth, whose characters converse in a flashy, garbled Cockney that's as unreal as the story's premise. Neil Pepe is the director. (12/1/97) (Atlantic, 336 W. 20th St. 645-1242.)



Richard Foreman's "Pearls for Pigs."

BEATTIE & DAVIDSON

Mud, River, Stone—An African-American couple becomes stranded while vacationing in Africa, in a new drama by Lynn Nottage. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 279-4200. Closes Dec. 28.)

Never the Sinner—John Logan's 1985 play about Leopold and Loeb, the teen-age millionaires who murdered a child in Chicago in 1924, sweeps its audience into the boys' friendship without ever losing sight of the brutal murder—a balancing act that Mr. Logan and the director, Ethan McSweeney, carry off seamlessly. They lay out the furor and the legal maneuvering surrounding this "trial of the century" particularly well, suggesting (though the play was written a decade before the O.J. case) that nothing much has changed. Jason Patrick Bowcutt and Michael Solomon are beautifully matched and utterly convincing as the killers; Robert Hogan, as their attorney, Clarence Darrow, is a winning combination of the humane and the calculating. (American Jewish Theatre, 307 W. 26th St. 633-9797. Closes Jan. 4.)

The Old Neighborhood—David Mamet's three elegant, autobiographical one-act plays full of laughter and lament. Well acted by Peter Riegert, Patti LuPone, Vincent Guastaferro, Rebecca Pidgeon, and Jack Willis, and crisply directed by Scott Zigler. Serious, beautiful, and short: an almost impossible feat these days on Broadway. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

Pearls for Pigs—Thank God for the avant-garde dramatist Richard Foreman. His latest play, while ostensibly nonsensical, is exhilarating, sad, hilarious, and frightening (and actually more meaningful than much of what's out there). David Patrick Kelly is wonderful as the Maestro (clearly the playwright's alter ego), an artist in crisis who immediately declares that he hates the theatre. The rest of the cast executes Foreman's finely choreographed "impulsive" theatre (as he calls it) with dreamlike precision. The experience is akin to falling down Alice's rabbit hole: the next day your brain is sore in places you haven't used in a long time. (Tribeca Performing Arts Center, 199 Chambers St. 279-4200. Closes Jan. 4.)

Pride's Crossing—A ninety-year-old woman who once swam the English Channel (Cherry Jones) relives the stages of her life, in Tina Howe's new play, directed by Jack O'Brien. (Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

Proposals—Neil Simon's new play is set at the summer home of a family that has been disrupted by divorce and is about to be further shaken by death. Although the wisecracks rely on Catskills-era ethnic stereotypes from which all the humor has long been drained, there is real feeling here—a softly sad, end-of-summer feeling—and it's brought out very capably by L. Scott Caldwell, who plays the family's longtime housekeeper, and by Dick Latessa, as a divorced father who's still in love with his former wife. Directed by Joe Mantello. (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

The Scarlet Pimpernel—This new musical, based on the Baroness Orczy novel, has a lot going for it (if you don't count its music and lyrics, which are dreadful and appalling, respectively): its charismatic star, Douglas Sills, Andrew Jackness's sets, and Jane Greenwood's costumes. Peter Hunt directed. (Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

The Seagull: The Hamptons, 1990s—Jeff Cohen's contemporary take on Chekhov's play, in a Worth Street Theatre revival. (Theatre 3, 311 W. 43rd St. 279-4200.)

Secrets Every Smart Traveler Should Know—A comic revue inspired by the Fodor's handbook of the same title. (Triad, 158 W. 72nd St. 799-4599.)

1776—Scott Ellis's lean, lively production of Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone's still fresh 1969 musical about the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. (9/8/97) (Gershwin, 51st St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

Side Show—A promising premise for a musical—the story of Violet and Daisy Hilton, Siamese twins who grew up in the world of carnivals and became a vaudeville act in the thirties—flattened by bombastic shlock rock, an unimaginative set, and a book that reduces the sisters' entire existence to a pulp-romance plot. Nevertheless, most of the actors manage to carry themselves with dignity. (11/3/97) (Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 307-4100.)

Sketches on Morning, Noon & Night—Spalding Gray presents his latest monologue. Dec. 19-21 at 9 and Dec. 22 at 8. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288.)

Stepping Out with Mr. Markham—The marriage of ballroom-dance partners in London crumbles, in a dark comedy by Jeanne Dorsey. (46 Walker Street Theatre, 46 Walker St. 560-7387. Closes Dec. 21.)

Street Corner Symphony—A revue of some thirty songs, mostly from the sixties and seventies, which turns into a real beltfest at times. When the eight cast members tone things down a bit and do some harmonizing, though, you recognize what the show could have been. Conceived, choreographed, and staged by Marion J. Caffey. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 307-4100.)

The Sunshine Boys—A revival of Neil Simon's comedy about two irascible old vaudevillians which provides a double dose of nostalgia: the tour guides for this trip to a bygone era of show biz are Ye Olde Odd Couple of television, Tony Randall and Jack Klugman. While there are some very funny lines, the production is somehow lacking in chemistry. The sandpapery friction that the twosome created so successfully on TV isn't much in evidence—they seem reduced to lovability. That's not a crime, but this production is definitely for those who prefer a warm cup of cocoa to a brisk toboggan ride. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 239-6280.)

Three Days of Rain—There's a deeply felt, unutterable sadness at the core of Richard Greenberg's play, in which three no longer young people try to sort out the legacy left to them by their parents. Every element of this production, which was directed by Evan Yionoulis, rings true. (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212. Closes Jan. 11.)

Triumph of Love—A musical adaptation of the 1732 Marivaux farce which brims with intelligence, feeling, musicality, and wit. The characters are more or less stock types, but the actors bring them to full ripeness. Michael Mayer directed. (11/3/97) (Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

Two Pianos, Four Hands—With the Canadian keyboardists Ted Dykstra and Richard Greenblatt. (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 580-1313.)

Uncle Tom's Cabin—Randolph Curtis Rand and Floraine Kay's adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, staged by the Drama Dept. (Greenwich House, 27 Barrow St. 541-8441. Closes Dec. 21.)

A View from the Bridge—Michael Mayer directs Anthony LaPaglia, Allison Janney, and Stephen Spinella in the Roundabout's revival of Arthur Miller's modern tragedy. (Broadway at 45th St. 719-1300.)

Visiting Mr. Green—Eli Wallach portrays a Jewish widower, in a drama by Jeff Baron. (Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 505-0700.)

Women. War. Comedy—A staging by Joseph Chaikin's Other Theatre of the German playwright Thomas Brasch's epic drama. (Theatre for the New City, 155 First Ave., at 10th St. 254-1109. Closes Dec. 21.)

LONG RUNS

AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN: Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 239-6200. . . . **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 307-4100. . . . **BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES:** Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370. . . . **BRING IN DA NOISE, BRING IN DA FUNK:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 239-6200. . . . **CATS:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 239-6200. . . . **CHICAGO:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 239-6200. . . . **THE FANTASTICKS:** Sullivan Street Playhouse, 181 Sullivan St., at Bleecker St. 674-3838. . . . **FORBIDDEN BROADWAY STRIKES BACK!:** Stardust, Broadway at 51st St. 239-6200. . . . **FOREVER TANGO:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200. . . . **A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM:** St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 239-6200. (Closes Jan. 4.) . . . . **GRANDMA SYLVIA'S FUNERAL:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 691-1555. . . . **GROSS INDECENCY: THE THREE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE:** Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, east of Sixth Ave., between W. 3rd and Bleecker Sts. 420-8000. . . . **HOWARD CRABTREE'S WHEN PIGS FLY:** Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 239-6200. . . . **HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE:** Century, 111 E. 15th St. 239-6200. . . . **I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE:** Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200. . . . **JEKYLL & HYDE:** Plymouth, 236

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DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET—Performances of the traditional dance bash at Clara and Fritz's and its magical aftermath—better known as "The Nutcracker"—continue through Jan. 4. (New York State Theatre. 870-5570. Dec. 17-18, Dec. 22-23, and Dec. 29-30 at 6; Dec. 19 at 8; Dec. 20 and Dec. 26-27 at 2 and 8; and Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 1 and 5.)

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE—Dec. 17 at 8: "Night Creature," "The Time Before . . . ," "Shelter," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 18 at 8: "Memoria," "Fandango," and "Slaves." . . . ¶ Dec. 19 at 8: "Polish Pieces," "Days Past, Not Forgotten," "Fandango," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 20 at 2: "Polish Pieces," "Days Past, Not Forgotten," "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 20 at 8: "Hymn," "Vespers," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 21 at 3: "Sweet Release," "Shelter," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 21 at 7:30: "Fin de Siècle," "Fandango," and "Suite Otis." . . . ¶ Dec. 23 at 8: "Night Creature," "Days Past, Not Forgotten," "Cavalcade," and "The Stack-Up." . . . ¶ Dec. 24 at 8: "Fin de Siècle," "Bad Blood," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 25 at 8: "Slaves," "The Time Before . . . ," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 26 at 8: "For Bird—with Love," "Cry," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 27 at 2: "Suite Otis," "Sweet Release," and Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 27 at 8: "Days Past, Not Forgotten," "The Time Before . . . ," "Bad Blood," and "The Stack-Up." . . . ¶ Dec. 28 at 3: "For Bird—with Love," "Cry," and "Revelations." . . . ¶ Dec. 28 at 7:30: "Hymn," "Vespers," and "Suite Otis." . . . ¶ Dec. 30 at 8: "Fin de Siècle," "Bad Blood," and "The Stack-Up." . . . ¶ Dec. 31 at 8: "Slaves," "Bad Blood," and "Revelations." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

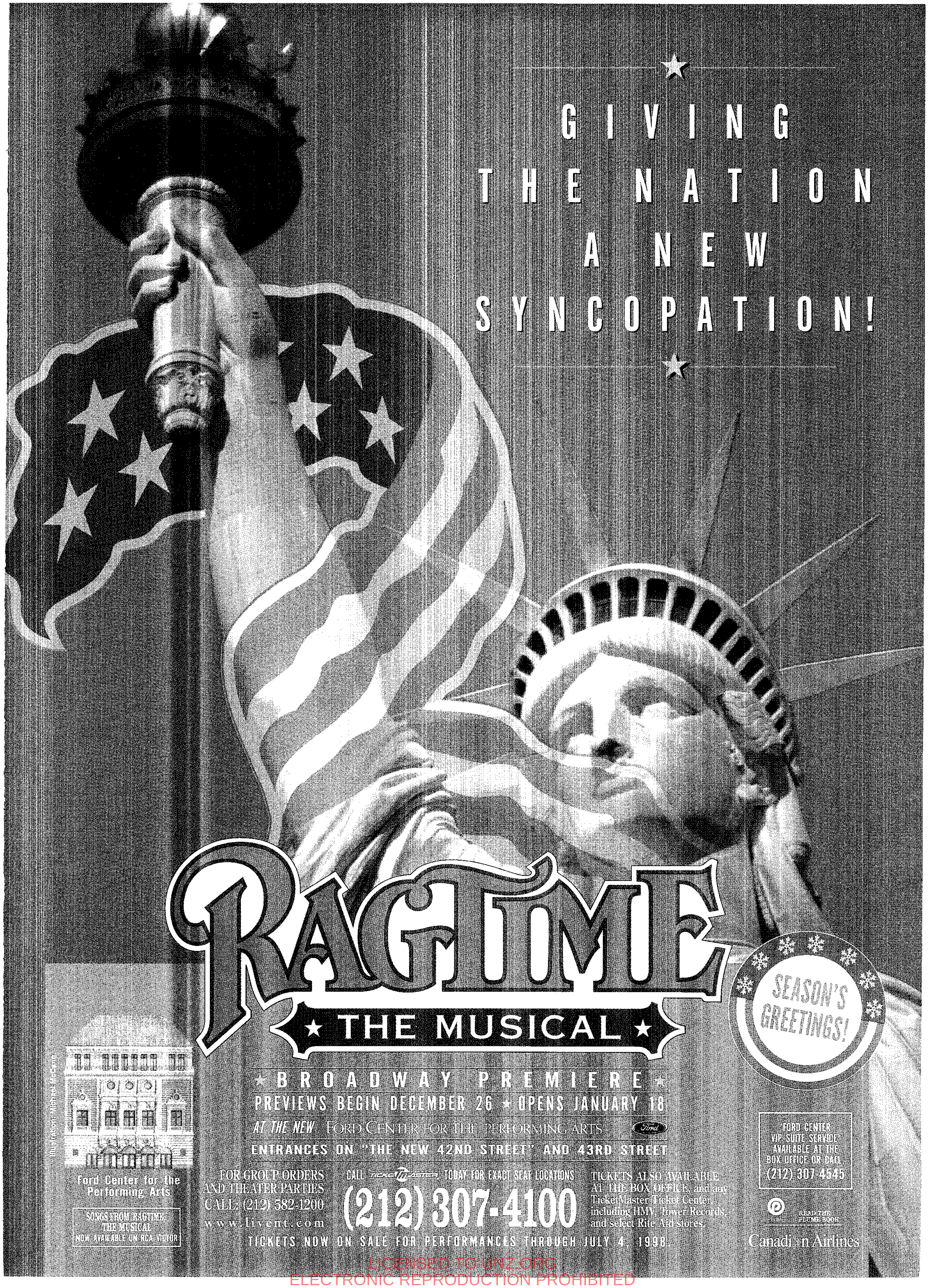
ELIZABETH STREB/RINGSIDE—Earlier this year, the MacArthur Foundation honored the daredevil choreographer with the action-comics movement vocabulary. (At rehearsals, she exhorts her dancers to "clump drop," "pop suck," and "fly splat," and that's pretty much what they do.) Other grants followed; the money has helped Streb create the mechanical marvels that make their début here. "When I was young, I always wanted this equipment," she says of her bungee contraption, her box-truss stage, her swivel-harness flying machine. In "Fly," veteran Ringsider Hope Clark is buckled onto a counterbalanced spoke that lets her dance on floor and ceiling with equal ease. "The existence of the floor is an impediment to inventing dance," Streb explains. "But it's pretty absolute, so it took me twenty years to see that." (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. Dec. 16-19, Dec. 23, Dec. 26, and Dec. 30 at 8; Dec. 20 and Dec. 27 at 2 and 8; and Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 2 and 7:30. Through Jan. 4.)

ANNIE B. PARSON BIG DANCE THEATRE—The eight-member company performs "A Simple Heart," based on the Flaubert story, and "The Gas Heart," which incorporates a complete, albeit brief, Dadaist play by Tristan Tzara. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 924-0077. Dec. 18-20 at 8 and Dec. 21 at 3.)

"ENDS OF MERCY"—RoseAnne Spradlin's seven-part solo takes the central nervous system for its subject, a typically suggestive choice for the choreographer whose works have a flickering, ephemeral quality at odds with their strong construction. "It's a bit of a puzzle," she says, with the calm of someone who delights in puzzles. "And how people are going to put it together is a mystery." (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 255-5793. Dec. 18-21 at 8.)

"THE YORKVILLE NUTCRACKER"—Francis Patrelle transports the Rat King, the dancing snowflakes, et al. to a New York setting, with the help of performers borrowed from City Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and Jennifer Muller/The Works. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. 772-4448. Dec. 18-19 at 7 and Dec. 20-21 at 2 and 7.)

"THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY: A NIGHTMARE"—Great Small Works' dance-and-performance adaptation, choreographed by Clarinda Mac Low, of the G. K. Chesterton novel about an anarchist conspiracy foiled by police infiltrators. The company's customary pasta repast follows the performance. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288. Dec. 26-28 and Dec. 31 at 8:30. Through Jan. 4.)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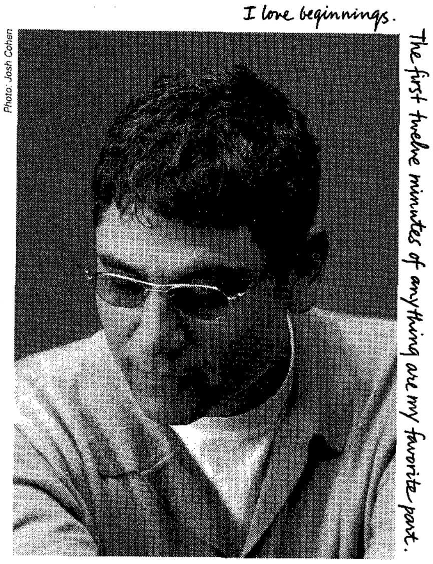
I love beginnings.

The first twelve minutes of anything are my favorite part.

Photo: Josh Cohen

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NIGHT LIFE

CONCERTS

The Benny Waters Quartet—Waters predates jazz itself. That this ninety-five-year-old saxman can still conjure up the lusty pleasures of the Swing Era is a combined triumph of art and endurance. (This show serves as a prelude to his birthday celebration, at the end of January.) His quartet includes pianist Cyrus Chestnut, drummer Vinnie Johnson, and young University of Massachusetts bassist Genevieve Rose; here's hoping they can keep up. (St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. Dec. 17 at 7:30. Tickets at the door.)

"Max Roach's America"—The master classes continue, with the drummer welcoming the great Latin percussionist Tito Puente on Dec. 17, and, on Dec. 18, joining choreographer and dancer Bill T. Jones and video artist Kit Fitzgerald in the world première of a work guaranteed to engage the ear and eye. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100. Both performances are at 8.)

KAREN CALDICOTT

Radiohead—On their latest disk, "OK Computer," Thom Yorke and his five-piece combo from Oxford have created a challenging, rewarding, and dazzlingly original pop kaleidoscope, part art rock, part grunge, part sunny-day psychedelia—one of the year's best records. The band's live shows are conversion experiences. (Hammerstein Ballroom, Manhattan Center, 311 W. 34th St. 564-4882. Dec. 19 at 10.)

Daft Punk—Above-average techno. (Hammerstein Ballroom, Manhattan Center. Dec. 20 at 10.)

John Kelly—The performance artist sings songs from the sixties and seventies by, among others, Brian Wilson, Blind Faith, and Tom Waits. (Westbeth Theatre Center, 151 Bank St. 741-0391. Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 7.)

George Winston—The pianist performs music by Vince Guaraldi and holiday favorites, as well as a few tunes on the Hawaiian slack-key guitar. (Alice Tully Hall. 875-5050. Dec. 22 at 8.)

David Broza—The Israeli rock star, performing with Brazilian percussionist Cyro Baptista and New York bassist Francisco Centeno. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 840-2824. Dec. 24 at 8:30.)

Phish—Vermont's favorite laid-back, jam-happy combo. (Madison Square Garden. 465-6000. Dec. 29-30 at 7:30 and Dec. 31 at 8.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

(A highly arbitrary listing, in which boldface type indicates some of the more notable performers in town. Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it is always advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.)

Algonquin Hotel, 59 W. 44th St. (840-6800)—Through Jan. 3, **andrea marcovicci** offers a program of songs associated with the late, great Mabel Mercer, whose classically trained voice showed how good club singing could be. (Sinatra called her "the finest music teacher in the world.") Marcovicci is a consummate club creature herself, oozing with personality, but too often she forgets to tend to the basics (like hitting the notes). No Mabel Mercer, for sure, but then, who is? Dining.

Birdland, 315 W. 44th St. (581-3080)—Dec. 17-18: **billy stritch,** the singing pianist and arranger (most spectacularly for Liza Minnelli), tries out songs from his new disk, "Waters of March: The Brazilian Album." Scheduled to be on hand the first evening are **ms. minnelli, tony bennett, linda lavin, tommy tune,** and others. Dec. 19-20: **annie ross,** perhaps best known for her work with the vocal trio Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, which excelled at setting lyrics to jazz instrumentals. **jim mc neely** and his ten-piece ensemble are in on Dec. 21 and Dec. 28. The **toshiko akiyoshi jazz orchestra** takes over on Dec. 22 and Dec. 29. Guitarist **paul bollenback** arrives with his trio on Dec. 23. **bobby watson** (Dec. 24-27), the intrepid altoist, has spent the last few years investigating new routes, but we can now be thankful that he's reassembled **horizon,** always an invigorating forum for his neo-bop conceptions.

Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (475-8592)—Pianist **joe sample** and his trio are in through Dec. 21. Brainy, virtuosic, lyrical, and musically omnivorous, pianist **chick corea** and vibraphonist **gary burton** (Dec. 23-28) were born to collaborate: theirs is the ego-free partnership of icons. Corea's tangy compositions and arrangements of classics value counterpoint and harmony above splashy technique. Still, when these two get going, the air becomes thick with sumptuous chords and tintinabulary tones, and you understand why, four decades down the line, they've maintained their exalted stature. Starting Dec. 30: **chick corea and origin.** Dining.

Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (744-1600)—In the Café Carlyle, **bobby short's** annual fall booking is drawing toward its New Year's Eve close. With an eight-piece band backing him, Short loses some of the intimacy that has long been his strong suit, and his voice seems unnecessarily over-amplified. Still, without the ensemble you'd be deprived of Virgil Jones's witty trumpet riffs. Short seems an eternally star-struck teen-ager, sharing gossipy tales of long-departed celebrities and exhorting his colleagues, "Play, orchestra, play!" Yet it's in such solo moments as Cole Porter's "At Long Last Love" that his classic song styling and superlative piano playing shine through best. . . . ¶ Across the hall, in Bemelmans Bar, **barbara carroll** works her accustomed wizardry at the keyboard through Jan. 3. If you're going for the music rather than the conviviality, it's wisest to arrive on the early side, though on nights when the room grows a tad rowdy with the passing hours Carroll turns inward and plays on unfazed. Her repertoire is apparently endless, her bearing unfailingly elegant, and her jazz-meets-cabaret pianism the most subtle and intricate New York has to offer.

Danny's Skylight Room, 346 W. 46th St. (265-8133)—Crooner **bill young** is in on Dec. 27.

Iridium, 44 W. 63rd St. (582-2121)—Through Dec. 21: Pianist **kenny barron,** bassist **ron carter,** and drummer **lewis nash** add up to a perfect mainstream rhythm section. With swing a given, inspiration's a sure thing, too. Dec. 23-28: Pianist **hank jones** seems to have been around forever, but his time is now. Some fifty years into an unassumingly brilliant career, he has become a contemporary Teddy Wilson, with each silken phrase perfect in form and diction. But his ambition and his repertoire continue to expand, and his collaborations with younger players keep him on his toes. Here he's accompanied by drummer Lewis Nash and bassist George Mraz. From Dec. 30: Saxophonist **joe henderson.** Mondays belong to electric-guitar innovator **les paul.** Dining.

Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—Through Dec. 21: The **david (fathead) newman** quartet. The tenor saxophonist has been carrying the banner of gritty soul-jazz since

Photo by Beatriz Schiller

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TASTE OF NEW YORK

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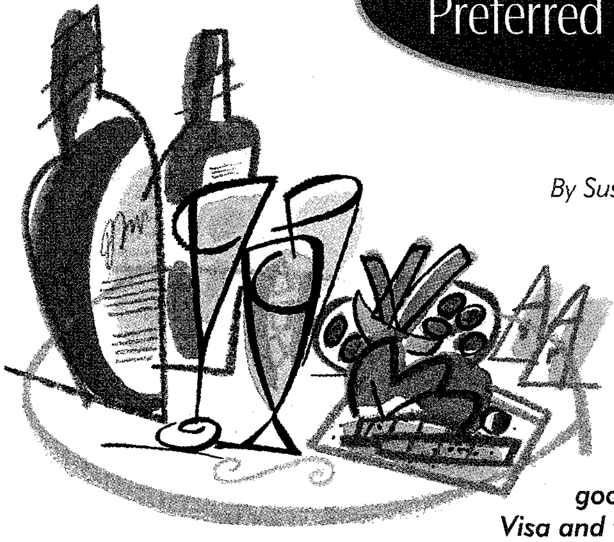


By Susan Breslow Sardone

In endlessly diverting New York City, where so many choices exist in entertainment, culture, and dining, often we end up returning to the tried-and-true rather than exploring something new. Thanks to Visa,* The New Yorker *continues to present this exclusive restaurant program to encourage you to partake of the best cuisine the city has to offer.*

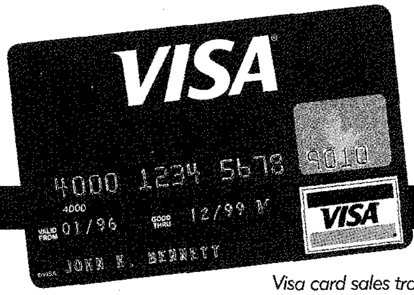
*As 1997 draws to a close and we look back on our good fortune and give thanks, we also remember the needy. Visa and the restaurants sharing in this program have not forgotten them either. Every time you charge a meal using your Visa® card at the restaurants participating in this and other "Taste of New York" features, you'll also contribute to Citymeals-on-Wheels, a not-for-profit organization that delivers hot meals and comfort to the homebound elderly.**

ARCADIA • 21 East 62nd Street • 212-223-2900
The pastoral Paul Davis mural that wraps around this elegant room shows the change of seasons—and also serves as a metaphor for chef Anne Rosenzweig's culinary talent. Not only is she attentive to seasonal ingredients, she's also skilled at taking the familiar and transforming it into the extraordinary through daringly brilliant combinations of flavors. In deepest winter, when body and soul crave a warm and filling meal, there's roast venison accompanied by sweet potato and maple hash. Squab grilled over cinnamon wood is served with a stew of sour cherries. Crispy roast cod is augmented with a ragoût of bacon, brussels sprouts, and chestnuts. Desserts, too, are far from commonplace: Tangy and tart blood-orange sorbet delights with fresh fruit and basil cream to accompany it. And the delicious warm chocolate bread pudding under a blanket of brandy custard sauce is exceptional.

ARIZONA 206 • 206 East 60th Street • 212-838-0440
Leave the chill behind as you arrive at Arizona 206: In this grotto-like atmosphere, where walls are plastered to look like adobe and a wood-burning fireplace, the warmth of the food as well as the hospitality welcomes you in. Shaded with colors of the desert, and decorated with the flowers that grow there, the mood is set for vibrant and authentic southwestern cuisine. Hearty roasted corn chowder—a fine beginning—is augmented by Louisiana rock shrimp, poblano chiles, sweet corn fritters, and chile maple syrup. A piquant second course, pan-roasted baby pheasant *adobo* (citrus marinade), is accompanied by chorizo enchiladas. While a simple chardonnay may satisfy, the sommelier can offer more creative suggestions for American wines to complement the inventive fare. Unless you must dash off to catch a movie, do stay for dessert: *Cajeta* banana flan served with crispy plantains and chocolate garnish is guaranteed to win rave reviews from the town's toughest critics.

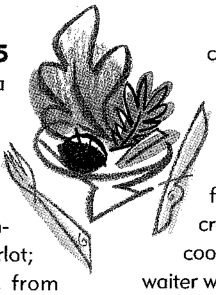
COCO PAZZO • 23 East 74th Street • 212-794-0205
Enter the rarefied world of Coco Pazzo, where young chef Roberto Mosconi is serving sophisticated Tuscan dishes to the appreciative residents of the Upper East Side. Even on a Monday night, while the rest of the city is still recovering from the weekend, this chic and popular restaurant fills every well-upholstered seat. En route to your table, you will see murals of Venetian glass bottles and pass by a tempting array of antipasti. But pace yourself for the portions are generous. Begin with an appetizer of perfectly cooked, flash-fried wild mushrooms and artichokes sprinkled with marinated tomatoes and truffle oil. Then listen to the many daily specials, which can range from *tagliatelle* to venison, snapper to rabbit. For a dessert that captures the flavor of the season in each bite, select steamed pumpkin pudding surrounded by plump golden raisins and topped with creamy mascarpone.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEVEN SALERNO



* Visa has guaranteed a $100,000 minimum contribution to Citymeals-on-Wheels related to Visa card sales transactions at participating restaurant locations through 12/31/97. Void where prohibited or restricted.

Share the bounty of the season with those less fortunate.*



DEMI • 1316 Madison Avenue (93rd) • 212-534-3475 On a cold December eve, what offers more comfort than a delicious meal beside a cheerful fireplace? That's what you'll find at cozy and intimate Demi, set inside a charming, four-story, Carnegie Hill brownstone. With brocade-covered walls, genteel oil paintings, and fresh blooms on the tables, it's a fine place to settle in with a congenial companion. Toast your good fortune with a bottle of rich merlot; the house recommends a 1994 Chateau Ste. Michelle, from Washington state. Purée of sweet split pea with crème fraîche and garlic croutons also warms the spirits. As an entrée, choose rack of baby lamb with garlic-mustard crust, *dauphinoise* potatoes, and an olive and red wine sauce. And for dessert, apple crisp à la mode and a steaming cup of cappuccino will sustain you through a wintry night. On Sunday, return for a gracious brunch and start the week with sweet and tart blueberry waffles.

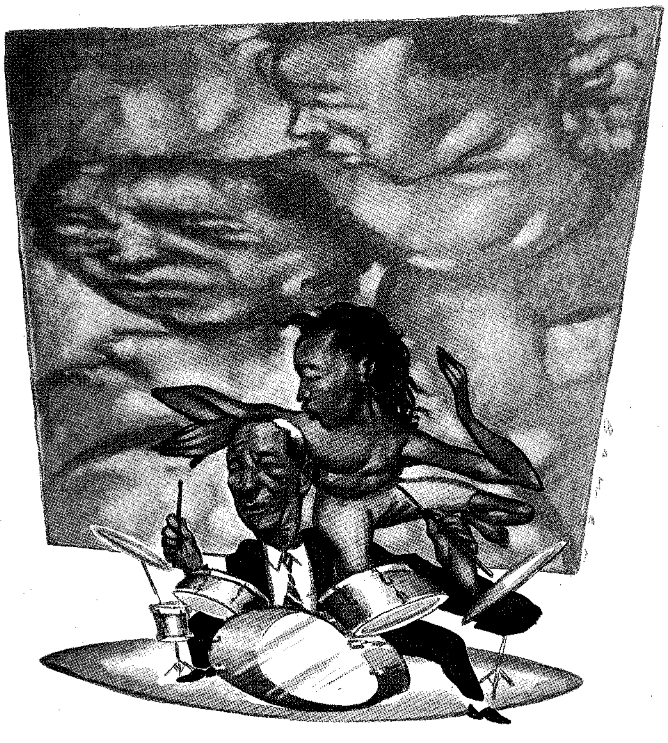
MESA CITY • 1059 Third Avenue (62nd) • 212-207-1919 A favorite watering hole for urban cowboys and girls, Bobby Flay's Mesa City flamboyantly incorporates the flavors of the Wild West. Sidle up to the bar and savor a frozen cactus-pear margarita or shot of Sauza while munching on tortilla chips with avocado relish. What draws the crowds? "I'm convinced the trend in this country is for more casual restaurants that deliver a lot of flavor for a reasonable price," says Flay, at home on the range. Here the price—as well as the spice—is right. Culinary fireworks explode in dishes such as blue-corn fried chicken with red-chile mustard honey and horseradish mashed potatoes. Even a normally bland item like grilled tuna is marinated in fresh herbs and accompanied by pineapple pickled-ginger salsa and tangy southwestern fries. Then hold your horses and stay for dessert: lemon granita with fresh fruit will cool your heels as well as your palate.

IL NIDO • 251 East 53rd Street • 212-753-8450 While the warm and affable Adi Giovannetti, Il Nido's owner, may not have been personally responsible for creating a white truffle shortage, he makes sure the treasured thallophyte is shaved with a generous hand atop everything from baby greens to risotto. Watching over his loyal customers (and after a single meal here, you're likely to become one) Giovannetti isn't hoarding the "Italian diamonds" this season either. After twenty-five years of serving business magnates as well as neighborhood fans, this quiet and comfortable restaurant has perfected its act. Leather banquettes are spaced far enough apart for patrons to carry on discreet conversations. You can choose from the authentic Northern Italian menu such classics as veal scaloppine and chicken marsala or order a few favorite ingredients and leave it up to the host to create a dish to your liking. Don't be surprised to find it cooked right in front of you and presented by a tuxedoed waiter who's as smooth as tiramisu.

THE SIGN OF THE DOVE • 1110 Third Avenue (65th) 212-861-8080 • What makes a restaurant seductive? It must appeal to all the senses—and it helps if it's beautiful. At The Sign of the Dove, red brick archways lead to intimate dining areas decorated with Oriental carpets and antique furnishings. Airy and sky lit by day, the rooms glow softly with candles in the evening. Fresh flowers, and bread from Ecce Panis, the bakery next door, subtly scent the air. Conversation is muted, and soft piano music drifts in from the café area. Then there's the food; Chef Andrew D'Amico's modern American fare is influenced by the cuisines of France, Italy, and Asia. This season he offers a rich gratin of gnocchi and porcini with parmesan and brioche crumbs as a first course. For a symphony of flavors, try Long Island duck with choucroute, duck ham with pan-fried spaetzle, and roasted seckel pears as your entrée. Equally inventive desserts can also inspire romance in this treasured landmark. ★

he was the pride of Ray Charles's classic band of the fifties. Newman came up the hard way, and you can hear every second of dues-paying in his fervent roughhouse tone. Dec. 23-28: The **JIMMY GREENE QUINTET.** Starting Dec. 30: Vocalist **VANESSA RUBIN.**

Knickerbocker, 33 University Pl., at 9th St. *(228-8490)—Dec. 17-20:* ***STEVE KUHN,*** *a marvellous pianist who finds new vistas in old standards, backed up by a first-rate rhythm section:* bassist **DAVID FINCK** and drummer **BILLY DRUMMOND.** Dec. 24-27: **JUDY CARMICHAEL** (piano) and **MIKE HASHIM** (saxophone).



"Max Roach's America," at the 92nd Street Y.

TIM BOWER

Knitting Factory, 74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—A mainstay of the city's new-jazz scene, saxophonist **TIM BERNE** (Dec. 17-21) makes music out of a skewed language all his own—fractured yet lyrical, scrupulously formal yet edgy with vitality. Dec. 20-21: The **SUN RA ARKESTRA.** The maestro has returned to Saturn, but his band plays on under the skillful direction of longtime saxophonist Marshall Allen. The unexpected is still to be expected. Dec. 24-28: The Knit's second annual holiday klezmer festival features the **KLEZMATICS,** the **NEW ORLEANS KLEZMER ALLSTARS, ANDY STATMAN,** and many more. Dec. 29: The **JAZZ PASSENGERS.** Dec. 30: The **LEE KONITZ** trio. Altoist Konitz remains one of our foremost improvisers. The living legend with the clear-water tone uses his harmonic erudition to create undulating melodies that mate Charlie Parker's pungency with the logic of Bach.

Sweet Basil, 88 Seventh Ave. S., at Bleecker St. (242-1785)—**RAY ANDERSON'S ALLIGATORY BLUES BAND** is in through Dec. 21. The down-home funk that has always lurked in the corners of Anderson's rangy trombone playing comes out into the sunshine when he plays with his band, bleating, splatting, and moaning to spicy rhythms cultivated below the Mason-Dixon Line. Dec. 23-28: The **CHICO FREEMAN** quartet. Freeman, a versatile instrumentalist who concentrates on tenor sax, is making a very graceful transition from youthful avant-gardist to middle-aged classicist. Starting Dec. 30: The **KENNY GARRETT** quartet. Dining.

Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—In the fifties, alto saxophonist **JACKIE MC LEAN** (through Dec. 21) was a sideman on some early Miles Davis sessions. By the sixties, such iconoclastic players as Ornette Coleman had appeared as sidemen on McLean recordings. After decades in the fray, McLean is practically a compendium of modern jazz; he makes the distinctions between bop, hard bop, and modal playing disappear. The expert pianist Cedar Walton's group plays behind him, upping the improvisational ante. Dec. *23-28: The* ***CEDAR WALTON*** *quartet. Pianist Walton* has a touch of Clark Kent, a touch of Superman: beneath his mild-mannered surface is a jazzman of steely power and intelligence. He's also a terrific composer and an exacting bandleader. With a quartet, his refined improvising ought to gleam. From Dec. 30: **DR. MICHAEL WHITE'S ORIGINAL *LIBERTY* JAZZ BAND OF NEW ORLEANS.** The **VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA** holds sway on Mondays.

Zinno, 126 W. 13th St. (924-5182)—You simply surrender yourself to **JAMES WILLIAMS** (through Dec. 20), letting his sweeping keyboard excursions, soulful left-hand foundations, and classic bebop lines wash over you like summer rain. He enlists the first-class assistance of **PETER WASHINGTON** on bass. Dec. 22-24 and Dec. 26-27: **BENNY POWELL** (trombone), **JANE JARVIS** (piano), and **EARL MAY** (bass). Dec. 29-31: Pianist **JUNIOR MANCE,** saxophonist **JOE TEMPERLEY,** and bassist **EARL MAY.**

ROCK, ETC.

Arlene Grocery, 95 Stanton St., between Ludlow and Orchard Sts. (358-1633)—Singer-songwriter **RICHARD BUCKNER** continues his Monday residency on Dec. 22 and Dec. 29. Local rockers **FONTAINE** are in on Dec. 27.

Bottom Line, 15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—Dec. 21: **NEW YORK NOËL,** a benefit concert featuring **ROSANNE CASH, IRIS DE MENT, LOUDON WAINWRIGHT III, SUZZY ROCHE, ANDREA MARCOVICCI,** and others. **RONNIE SPECTOR** throws a holiday party on Dec. 26-27.

Brownies, 169 Avenue A, at 10th St. (420-8392)—Dec. 18: The **FRANK & WALTERS** play keen, feel-good pop born on their home shores of Cork. The wacky, all-female power trio known as **CAKE LIKE** is in on Dec. 19. Also on the bill are **A DON PIPER SITUATION** and **HOME.**

Irving Plaza, 17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—Dec. 20: **CHUMBAWAMBA,** the rollicking eight-piece band from Leeds which recently hit pay dirt with its working-class anthem "Tubthumping." Dec. 26: **FROM GOOD HOMES.**

Mercury Lounge, 217 E. Houston St. (260-4700)—Dec. 17: The smart three-woman funk outfit known as **BETTY.** Dec. 18: **THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS** wrap up their Thursday residency.

S.O.B.'s, 204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (243-4940)—Dec. 29: **INDIA.** Born in Puerto Rico and raised in the South Bronx, India is, along with her label mate Marc Anthony, a major part of the Latin new wave that has invigorated salsa with an urban sting. Live, *she's a beautiful, riveting presence, and her* backup band burns hotter than the cigars she loves to puff on. Pure excitement. Dining.

Tramps, 51 W. 21st St. (727-7788)—Dec. 19: The **BLASTERS.** Headed by brothers Phil and Dave Alvin, this once great New Wave combo was the most all-American alternative act of the eighties. Let's hope that the brothers can still trot out their great mix of blues, R. & B., and back-porch country burners. Dec. 27: **SOUTHSIDE JOHNNY,** the onetime Springsteen protégé and his high-octane Asbury Park bar band. Dec. 29: The ultra-tight horn combo **TOWER OF POWER.**

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

(All these institutions will be closed Christmas.)

Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—"The Private Collection of Edgar Degas." Through Jan. 11. . . . ¶ "The Drawings of Filippino Lippi and His Circle." Through Jan. 11. . . . ¶ "Jackson Pollock: Early Sketchbooks and Drawings." Through Feb. 8. . . . ¶ "Richard Pousette-Dart (1916-92)." Thirty-odd paintings by the late Abstract Expressionist. Through Feb. 22. . . . ¶ "King of the World: A Mughal Manuscript from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle" and "Flowers Underfoot: Indian Carpets of the Mughal Era," two exhibitions celebrating Indian art. Through Feb. 8 and March 1, respectively. . . . ¶ "Francesco Clemente: Indian Watercolors." Through Feb. 8. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:15, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 8:45.)

Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—"Egon Schiele: The Leopold Collection, Vienna." (See also Galleries—Uptown, Short List.) Through Jan. 4. . . . ¶ "On the Edge: Contemporary Art from the Werner and Elaine Dannheisser Collection." Through Jan. 20. . . . ¶ "Deadpan," a video installation by Steve McQueen, in the Project Room. Through Feb. 10. . . . ¶ "Achille Castiglioni: Design!" Cutlery, spotlights, floor lamps, tractor seats, and other graceful items from the witty Italian designer. Through Jan. 6. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 10:30 to 6; Fridays, 10:30 to 8:30.)

Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—"Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective" offers more than four hundred pieces from nearly half a century of work. At both Guggenheim venues, through Jan. 7. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 10 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 10 to 8.)

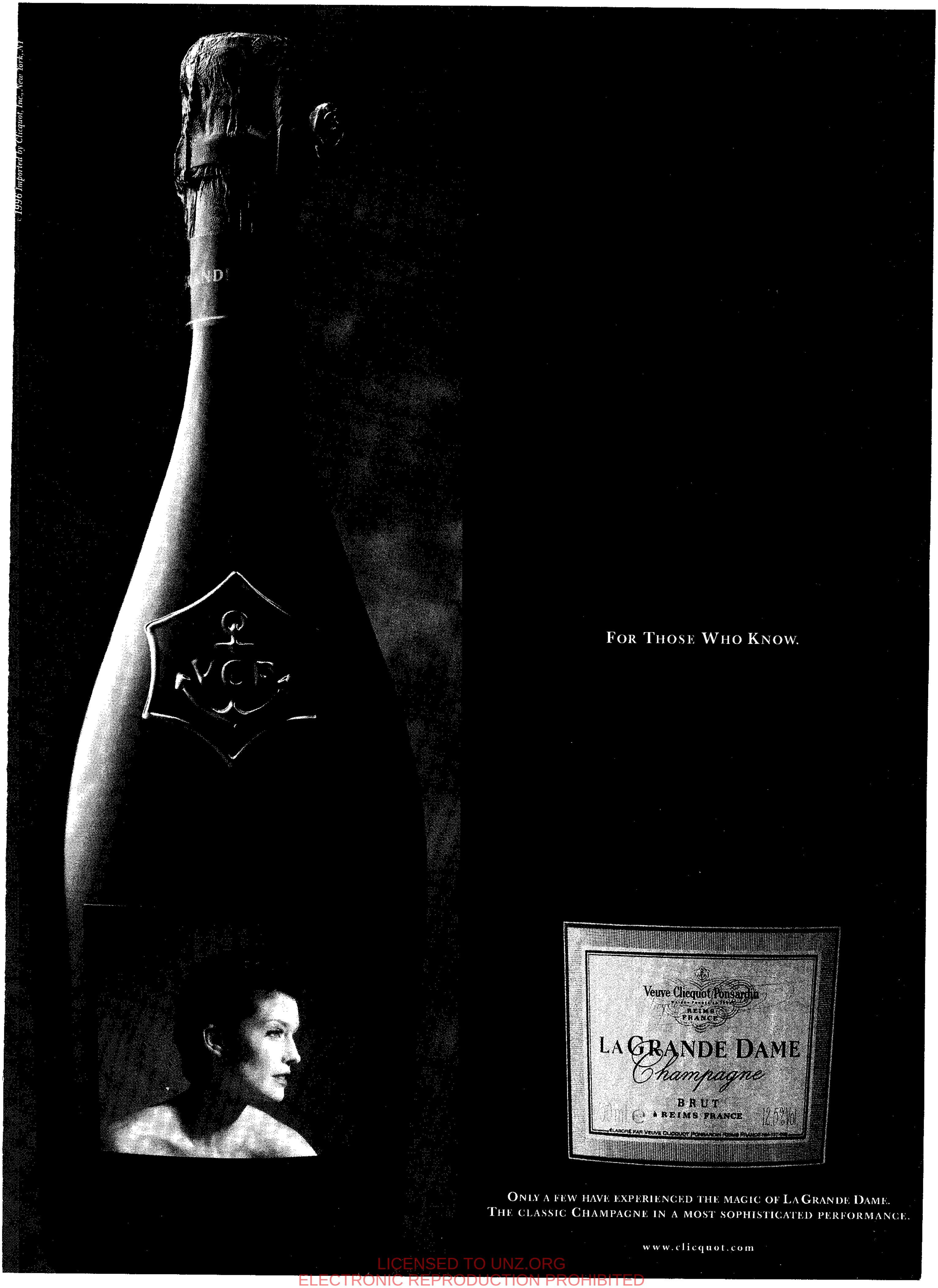
Guggenheim Museum SoHo, 575 Broadway, at Prince St. (423-3500)—The museum's Rauschenberg retrospective continues here. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Saturday evenings until 8.)

Whitney Museum of American Art, Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—The Richard Diebenkorn retrospective, through Jan. 11. . . . ¶ "The Warhol Look/Glamour Style Fashion." Through Jan. 18. (Open Wednesdays, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6; Thursdays, 1 to 8.)

American Museum of Natural History, Central Park W. at 79th St. (769-5100)—"The Nature of Diamonds" looks at many facets of the adamantine stone, from its birth in volcanic fissures to its eventual rise to the heads of heads of state (e.g., on the crown of Peter the Great, displayed in the exhibition's walk-in diamond vault). Through April 26. . . . ¶ "Drawing Shadows to Stone: Photographing North Pacific Peoples, 1897-1902." Through March 1. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 8:45.)

Brooklyn Museum of Art, Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—"Monet and the Mediterranean" is an exquisite exhibition that shows the artist both on the brink of discovering the "serial procedure" that would become his signature and after having mastered it. The gardens and seascapes of Antibes radiate a delightful freshness; the opulence of the paintings of the Doge's Palace and the Palazzo Dario aflame in dying light is dazzling. Through Jan. 4. . . . ¶ "The Furniture of George Hunzinger: Invention and Innovation in Nineteenth Century America." Through Feb. 15. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, except Friday, Dec. 26, 10 to 8; Saturdays, 10 to 9; Sundays, 10 to 7, except Dec. 28, 10 to 8; and Monday and Tuesday, Dec. 29-30, 10 to 6.)

Jewish Museum, Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (423-3200)—"Assignment: Rescue, The Story of Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee," an exhibition devoted to the efforts of an editor at the Foreign Policy Association, in New York, who saved nearly two thousand artists, intellectuals, and political refugees—including Marc Chagall, André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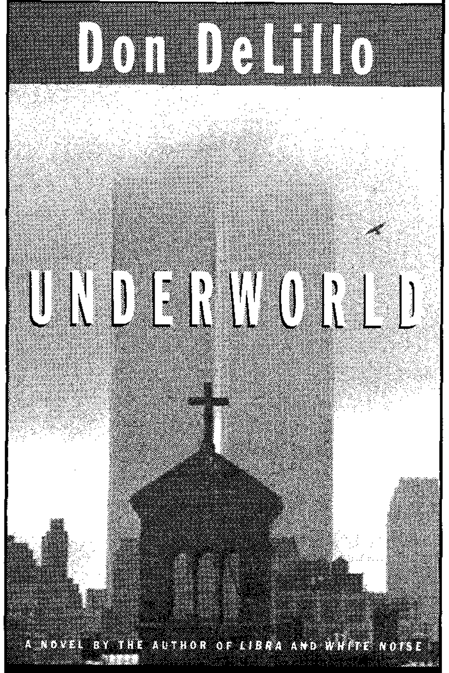

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

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*ADAM BEGLEY, *The New York Observer*

Breton, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Lipchitz—whose lives were endangered by the "surrender on demand" clause in a treaty between Vichy France and Germany. Through March 29. . . . ¶ "Facing the New World: Jewish Portraits in Colonial and Federal America." Through Jan. 11. (Open Sundays through Thursdays, 11 to 5:45, and Tuesday evenings until 8.)

Museo del Barrio, Fifth Ave. at 104th St. (831-7272)—"Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean" chronicles the religious and secular life of some of the islands' original inhabitants. The few words from the Taíno language that survive in English ("barbecue," "canoe," "hammock," "hurricane") offer hints about this civilization, but much more can be gleaned from the artifacts collected here: worked-seashell amulets, three-pointed stones dedicated to the cassava gods, wooden chairs carved with animal figures for the local chieftains, vomit-inducing bone spatulas used by shamans to prepare the body for the ingestion of sacred hallucinogens. Through March 29. (Open Wednesday through Sundays, 11 to 5.)

Museum of American Folk Art, Columbus Ave. at 65th St. (977-7170)—"The Image Business: Shop and Cigar Store Figures in America" presents familiar threshold icons (twenty cigar-store Indians) and more recondite items (including carvings of Puck, Father Time, and a firefighter). Through Jan. 11. (Open daily, except Mondays, 11:30 to 7:30.)

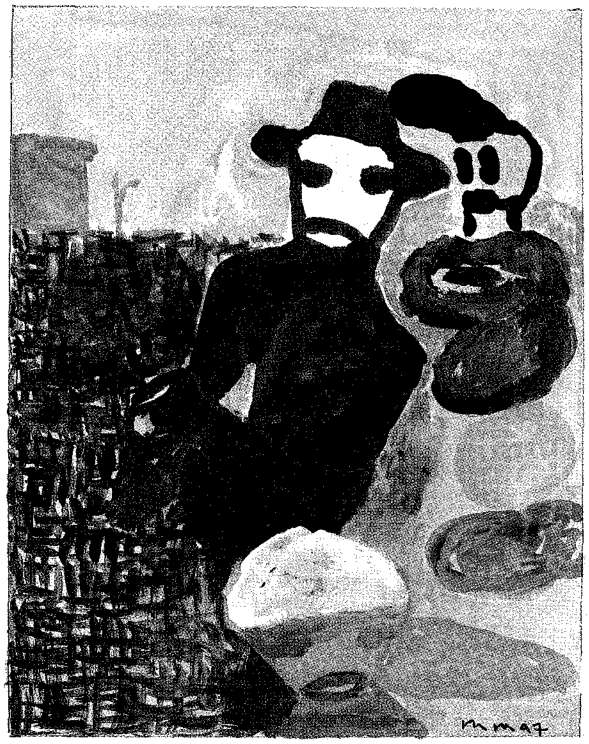
The New Museum, 583 Broadway (219-1222, ext. 217)—Despite delays in its renovation and expansion, the museum has reopened its original exhibition space for a mid-career retrospective of the work of the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, whose sculptures and video installations range from the lyric and frivolous ("Hair Necklace") to the macabre and excruciatingly tactile ("Pin Carpet" and "Entrails Carpet," as well as "Corps Étranger," in which a fiber-optic video camera makes a tour of the artist's innards). Through Feb. 22. (Open Wednesdays and Sundays, noon to 6; Thursdays through Saturdays, noon to 8.)

New-York Historical Society, 2 W. 77th St., at Central Park W. (873-3400)—"Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Lights of Times Square" surveys midtown pyrotechnics from the earliest days of incandescence (multi-bulb Wrigley's "spearmen" frolicking on a block-long pack of gum) through the heyday of neon and steam (Planters peanuts' leguminous cascade, Camel cigarettes' ten-foot smoke rings) to current L.E.D. computer technology. Through March 8. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 to 5.)

P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City. (718-784-2084)—The museum re-creates "Rooms," its inaugural group show from 1976, and presents one-person exhibitions from the late filmmaker Jack Smith, photographers John Coplans and Martin von Haselberg, and sculptors Jackie Winsor and Lynne Yamamoto. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

(Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6. They will all be closed Christmas.)



Self-portrait by Martin Mull (Beitzel).

Vincent Desiderio—Large figurative works in oil, nearly evenly divided between triptychs and grand single panels. The subjects seem to veer between a cool academicism (a studio floor covered with art-history manuals) and wrenching autobiography (the artist's hauntingly innocent young son, who suffers from hydrocephaly). In this case, technical mastery—the controlled palettes, the delicate alternation of outline and sfumato—doesn't veil the emotional urgency. Through Jan. 3. (Marlborough, 40 W. 57th St. 541-4900. Open Mondays.)

Franz Kline (1910-62)—An engaging survey tracing the painter's artistic growth from the representational portraits and sketches of his twenties and thirties to the culmination of his exploration of Abstract Expressionism—the garish, hysterical "Scudera"—in the year before his death. Along with some of the stately, enigmatic black-and-white canvases on which his reputation rests are examples of his forays into color—which, one suspects, he was not entirely comfortable with. His works from the early fifties, in black ink and oil on the brittle pages of telephone books, are particularly appealing, combining the rapturous gesture of a Chinese calligrapher with the poignancy of the found object. Through Jan. 17. (Stone, 113 E. 90th St. 988-6870.)

Cy Twombly—Ten major bronzes, most of them cast from two distinct elements: found objects and manually wrought plaster and clay. By definition, they are hybrids, and they look very unlike the artist's far more famous paintings. The latter typically stress flux, uncertainty, liquid metamorphosis; the sculptures, by contrast, are unbendingly material. (It's possible to imagine enthusiasts of the paintings failing to respond to the sculptures' attenuated elegance, and vice versa.) The excellent catalogue text is by the eminent British critic David Sylvester. Through Dec. 20. (Gagosian, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 744-2313.)

"Man Ray: An American Surrealist Vision"—Paintings, drawings, photographs, films, and sculptures by one of the most consistently intriguing artists in the orbit of international Surrealism. This exhibition doesn't stint on Ray's paintings, which aren't nearly as well known as his photographs and sculptures. Most of them have a certain dry clumsiness that, in fact, contributes to their charm. Through Dec. 20. (Emmerich, 41 E. 57th St. 752-0124.)

Short List—**DOUG ARGUE**, Associated American Artists, 20 W. 57th St. 399-5510. Through Jan. 3. . . . **RICHARD BAKER**, Washburn, 20 W. 57th St. 397-6780. Through Jan. 17. . . . **GREGORY BARSAMIAN**, Schmidt-Bingham, 41 E. 57th St. 888-1122. Through Dec. 23. . . . **JAN FRANK**, Danese, 41 E. 57th St. 223-2227. Through Jan. 10. . . . **WILLIAM GROPPER**, Aca, 41 E. 57th St. 644-8300. Through Jan. 31. . . . **SOL LE WITT**, Ubu, 16 E. 78th St. 794-4444. Through Jan. 3. . . . **MARKUS LUPERTZ**, Werner, 21 E. 67th St. 988-1623. Open Mondays; through Jan. 24. . . . **MARCELLO MONDAZZI**, Landon, 1926 Broadway, at 65th St. 721-8277. Through Jan. 11. . . . **JOAN NELSON**, Robert Miller, 41 E. 57th St. 980-5454. Through Jan. 24. . . . **DOUGLAS OSA**, Tatistcheff, 50 W. 57th St. 664-0907. Through Dec. 30. . . . **EGON SCHIELE**, Galerie St. Etienne, 24 W. 57th St. 245-6734. Through Jan. 3. . . . **JONATHAN SHAHN**, O'Hara, 41 E. 57th St. 355-3330. Through Jan. 10. . . . **TONY SMITH AND CHRISTOPHER WILMARTH**, Hirschl & Adler Modern, 21 E. 70th St. 535-8810. Through Jan. 24. . . . **SAUL STEINBERG**, Baumgold, 128 E. 72nd St. 861-7338. Through Feb. 7. . . . **TREVOR WINKFIELD**, De Nagy, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 262-5050. Through Jan. 5. . . . **ANDREW WYETH**, David Findlay, Jr., 41 E. 57th St. 486-7660. Through Jan. 3.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

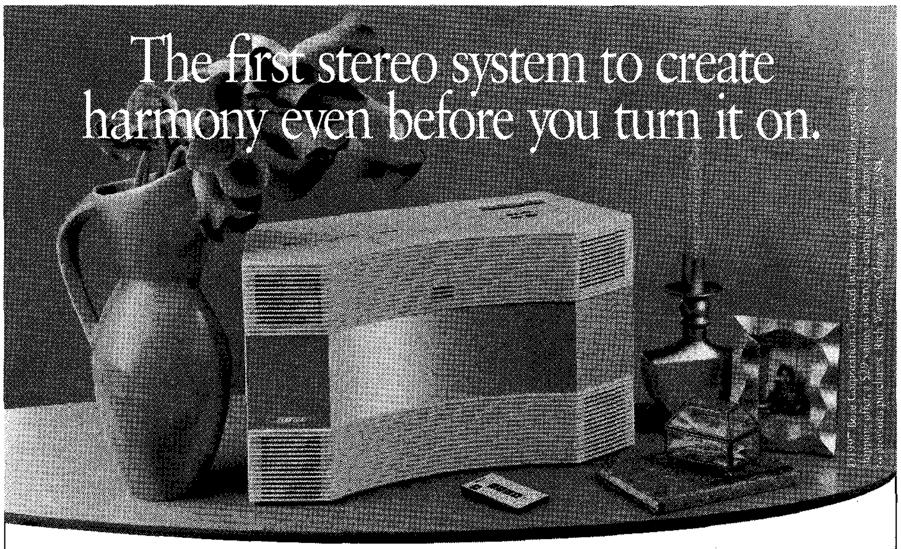
Carl Andre—"Typewriter Drawings" (1963), delicate abstractions created on a manual typewriter using various typographical elements: asterisks, periods, underscores, etc. Like all of Andre's work, they're materialist creations that give off a mystical vibe. Also on view is "Blue Cut Trials" (1963), an example of Andre's poetry —reminiscent of concrete poetry and of Pound—typed on several sheets of paper. Through Dec. 20. (Cooper, 534 W. 21st St. 255-1105.)

Robert Longo—The artist's yearlong drawing-a-day project demonstrates an impressive range of photorealist effects, lavished mostly on an all-too-familiar take on media saturation (the Munich Olympics, Janis Joplin, a burning cross, Tiger Woods). Through Jan. 10. (Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 206-7100.)

Bill Traylor (1854-1947)—Works on cardboard by the African-American folk artist, an illiterate ex-slave who didn't begin painting until he was eighty-four. The combination of blunt construction, bold composition, energetic geometry, and mute drama give these panels an eloquence that is transcendently lacking in irony. It also makes them hard to pigeonhole and turns them into a somewhat discomfitting stop on a stroll through Chelsea—which is the reason to go. Through Dec. 24. (Ricco/Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 627-4819.)

"Joan Mitchell/John Chamberlain: A Juxtaposition"—Paintings by Mitchell (1926-92), a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, and freestanding and wall-mounted crushed-auto-part sculptures by Chamberlain (b. 1927). The two are almost exact contemporaries, yet, despite their obvious affinities, her work seems to exhale the spirit of the fifties, whereas his, with its conspicuous reliance on readymade elements, is much more sixties. The large Chamberlain here, "Divine Ricochet" (1991), is floridly gorgeous. Through Jan. 10. (Cheim & Read, 521 W. 23rd St. 242-7727.)

Short List—**ERZSÉBET BAERVELDT**, I-20 Gallery, 529 W. 20th St. 645-1100. Through Jan. 10. . . . **MATTHEW BARNEY**, Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 206-9300. Through Dec. 20. . . . **GEORGE CONDO AND WILLIAM BURROUGHS**, Hearn, 530 W. 22nd St. 727-7366. Through Jan. 17. . . . **SCOTT LYALL**, Greene Naftali, 526 W. 26th St. 463-7770. Through Jan. 31. . . . **ERNESTO PUJOL**, Kirkland, 504 W. 22nd St. 627-3930. Through Jan. 31. . . . **ERIC WOLF**, Fredericks, 504 W. 22nd St. 633-6555. Through Dec. 24. . . . **CARRIE YAMAOKA**, Debs, 529 W. 20th St. 647-7080. Through Jan. 17.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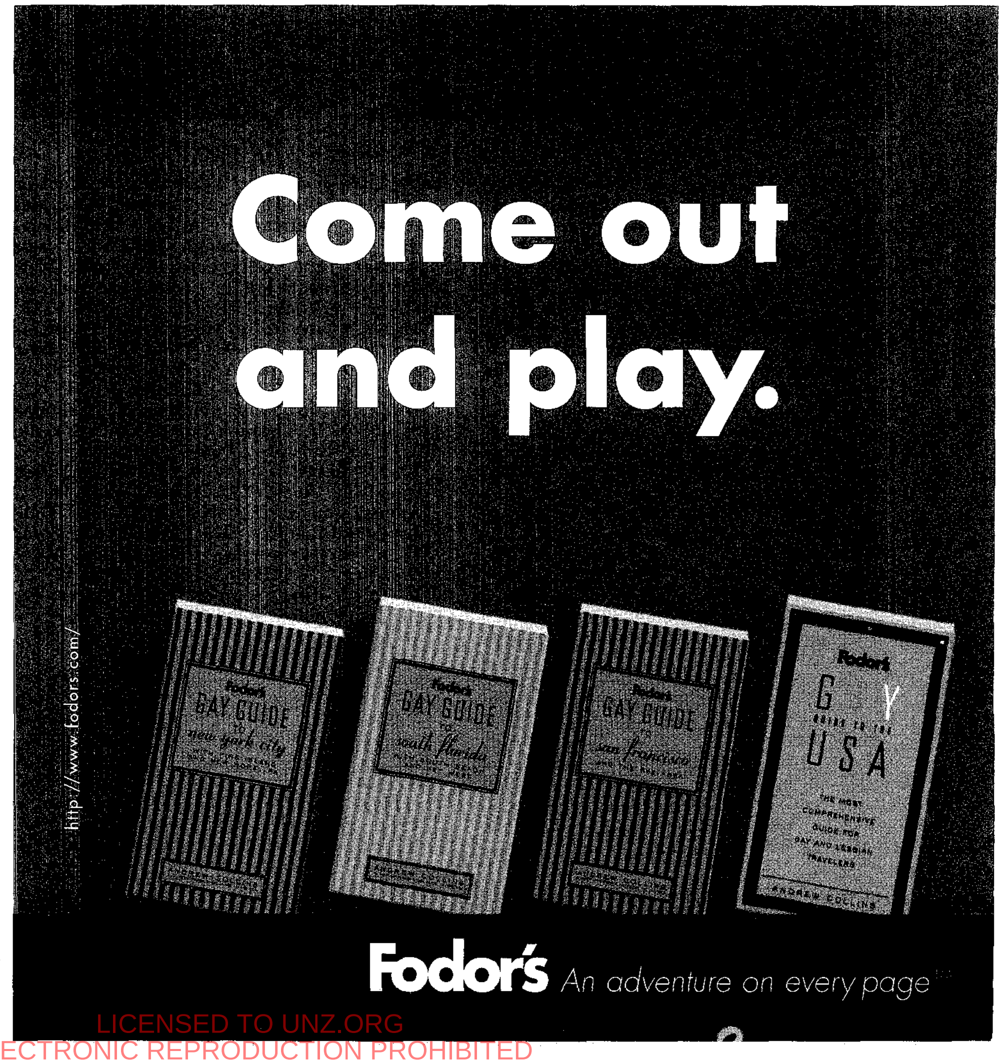
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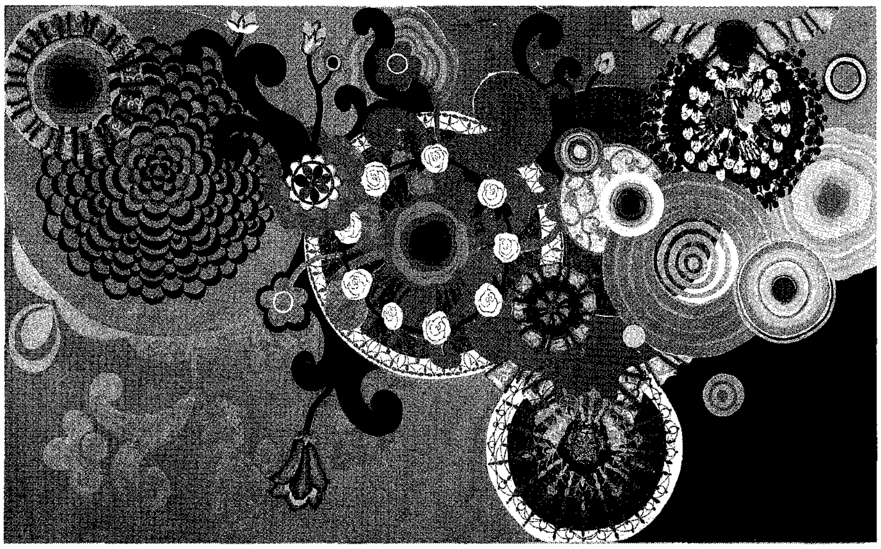
GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Walter Anderson (1903-65) / **Charles Burchfield** (1893-1967)—Two artists who divided their allegiance between modernism and naturalism. Anderson is almost unknown beyond Mississippi's Gulf coast; this selection of watercolors offers a provocative taste. His brand of mad medieval geometry and Southern light is best seen in "Blue Crab," which shows the craggy creature scrambling over a bumpy rock. The better-known Burchfield seems to be along for the ride; at best, his bubbling landscapes provide a handy reference. Through Jan. 3. (Ross, 568 Broadway. 343-2161.)

Judie Bamber and **Kurt Kauper**—Bamber's intimate watercolors (titled simply by date and apparently all of the same man, sometimes accompanied by a small girl) have the banal, poignant quality of snapshots taken at the beach, in the living room, at the typewriter—documents both of loss and of remembrance. Interspersed are a pair of Kauper's large-scale, ambiguous "Diva Fiction" oil portraits, of what look like women to be reckoned with. Posed in brilliantly colored, beautifully draped gowns—camp Ingres—against vivid monochromatic backgrounds, they project the imperious remove of majestic birds. Through Jan. 10. (Gorney, 100 Greene St. 966-4480.)



"Menino Pescando" ("Boy Fishing"), by Beatriz Milhazes (Thorp).

Tom Butter—Minimal fibreglass-and-steel sculptures, both freestanding and attached to the wall, which are playful as well as disarmingly beautiful. In the kinetic "Big Wheel," a thin, pink, translucent six-foot disk is suspended by elegant black steel trestlework. In "Cat in the Hat," two towering yellow columns, which suggest preposterously oversized stovepipe hats, are positioned end to end, conveying a charming, vertiginous uncertainty. Small wall sculptures (e.g., "Dive," a box with a thin plane of wood attached to one side and coils of steel to the other) suggest possibilities of motion and cast lovely tangled shadows. Through Dec. 20. (Marcus, 578 Broadway. 226-3200.)

Charles Goldman—Eight two-by-fours of standard-grade pine, systematically arranged twenty-four hundred ways. The gallery slide show, which documents it all, looks aggravating at first, but after you get the hang of it you want to go home and play with blocks—a response that, for this kind of work, is a triumph. Through Jan. 17. (Correct, 109 Ludlow St. 979-7071. Closed Tuesdays; opens at noon.)

Beatriz Milhazes—Striking oils with seductive contradictions. Decorative elements (roses, beadwork, crockery patterns, ribbon-edged hearts) cross the canvas with the boldness of a big, black Franz Kline stroke. Bright and unexpected colors (profound pinks, bursts of Day-Glo, concentric metallic shades) are layered or juxtaposed until they achieve placidity or the settled allure of age. Through Jan. 10. (Thorp, 103 Prince St. 431-6880.)

Martin Mull—Oneiric images (mutt heads, floating limbs, bare trees, feature-free faces) in a pleasingly contrarian hand: Mull's watercolors have the opacity of oil, his oils a shimmmery transparency. Through Dec. 20. (Beitzel, 102 Prince St. 219-2863.)

"Deep Skin Excursion: Early Work by Howard Fried"—Curated by Dennis Oppenheim, this show endeavors to resuscitate the reputation of a forgotten Conceptualist. Fried (b. 1946) focussed on installations and performances, some of which are documented here. In "The Burghers of Fort Worth" (1975), he drolly parodied art education: in art school, one interacts with several different "masters" at once; Fried took golf lessons with four different pros at once. Through Jan. 3. (Apex Art, 291 Church St. 431-5270.)

Short List—**juan abreu**, Goldstein, 39 Wooster St. 431-0314. Through Jan. 10. . . . **charles benefiel**, American Primitive, 594 Broadway. 966-1530. Through Jan. 10. . . . **moe brooker**, June Kelly, 591 Broadway. 226-1660. Through Jan. 6. . . . **joseph di giorgio**, Steele, 420 West Broadway. 941-8388. Through Jan. 10. . . . **sylvie fleury**, Postmasters, 80 Greene St. 941-5711. Through Dec. 20. . . . **paula hayes**, A/C Project Room, 15 Renwick St. 219-8275. Through Jan. 17. . . . **kana & olympios**, Lehmann Maupin, 39 Greene St. 965-0753. Through Jan. 17. . . . **yves klein**, A/D, 560 Broadway. 966-5154. Through Jan. 10. . . . **sherry markovitz**, Knowlton, 568 Broadway. 966-2625. Through Jan. 24. . . . **jennifer monick**, First New York: Staff Gallery, 495 Broadway. 925-9700. Through Jan. 17. . . . **beverly pepper**, Cowles, 420 West Broadway. 925-3500. Through Jan. 17. . . . **julião sarmento**, Sean Kelly, 43 Mercer St. 343-2405. Through Jan. 24.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

Christie's—Dec. 17: Rugs and carpets. . . . ¶ Dec. 18: Antiquities. (Park Ave. at 59th St. 546-1000.) . . . At **christie's east:** Comic books and rare materials relating to *Mad* magazine; also, a sale of animation art. (219 E. 67th St. 606-0400. Dec. 18.)

Sotheby's—Dec. 17: Antiquities and Islamic art. . . . ¶ Dec. 19: Animation art. . . . ¶ Dec. 20: Collectibles of all sorts—a convenient auction for last-minute shoppers. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 606-7000.)

Doyle—Furniture, decorative pieces, and paintings. (175 E. 87th St. 427-2730. Dec. 17.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

"Monk's World"—A well-worth-it group show for jazz lovers: forty black-and-white pictures of the legendary pianist and composer Thelonious Monk, alone and with such luminaries as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Gerry Mulligan. Portraits of Coleman Hawkins, James P. Johnson, and Duke Ellington are also on view. The photographers include William Claxton, William Gottlieb, Herb Snitzer, and Lee Tanner. Through Jan. 11. (The Jazz Gallery, 290 Hudson St., at Spring St. 242-1063. Opens at 1; open Sundays.)

"1930s New York"—Vintage works by Berenice Abbott, Sol Prom, Liborio Justo, and Joseph Kaplan. Through Jan. 17. (Greenberg, 120 Wooster St. 334-0010.)

"Painted Press Prints, 1920s-1960s"—Retouched photographs that ran in newspapers and magazines around the world, most by anonymous artists and a handful by such photographers as Robert Capa, Dmitri Baltermants, and Roman Vishniac. Through Jan. 10. (Kasher, 54 North Moore St. 966-3978. Open Wednesdays through Saturdays, noon to 6.)

"Paris, City of Light"—The city as muse, in the photographs of Bruce Cratsley, Todd Webb, and André Kertész. Through Jan. 3. (Richardson, 560 Broadway. 343-1255.)

"Scene from Behind"—A playful group of images that, in one way or another, depict a posterior view. Among the artists are Helen Levitt, Lauren Greenfield, Louis Faurer, Lee Friedlander, and Leon Levinstein. Through Jan. 10. (Morthland, 225 Tenth Ave., at 23rd St. 242-7767. Open Sundays, noon to 5.)

International Center of Photography Midtown—"Weegee's World: Life, Death and the Human Drama," a two-hundred-picture exhibition that spans the tabloid photographer's career. Through March 8. (Sixth Ave. at 43rd St. 860-1777. Open daily, except Mondays, 11 to 6, and Tuesday evenings until 8.)

Short List—**zeke berman**, Laurence Miller, 138 Spring St. 226-1220. Through Jan. 17. . . . **constantin brancusi**, McCoy, 41 E. 57th St. 319-1996. Through Feb. 7. . . . **john coplans**, Rosen, 130 Prince St. 941-0203. Through Jan. 3. . . . **margaret courtney-clarke** and **tessa traeger**, Witkin, 415 West Broadway. 925-5510. Both shows through Jan. 24. . . . **valdir cruz**, Throckmorton, 153 E. 61st St. 223-1059. Through Jan. 10. . . . **john dugdale**, Wessel and O'Connor, 242 W. 26th St. 242-8811. Open Sundays; through Jan. 11. . . . **andreas feininger**, Benrubi, 52 E. 76th St. 517-3766. Through Jan. 24. . . . **lee friedlander**, Borden, 560 Broadway. 431-0166. Through Dec. 31. . . . **seiichi furuya**, Robert Miller, 41 E. 57th St. 980-5454. Through Jan. 3. . . . **andreas gursky**, Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 243-0200. Through Dec. 24. . . . **robert glenn ketchum**, Burden, 20 E. 23rd St. 505-5555. Through Jan. 16. . . . **hiroji kubota**, Equitable, Seventh Ave. at 52nd St. 554-4818. Open Mondays; through Jan. 3. . . . **rebecca lepkoff**, Gallery 292, at 120 Wooster St. 431-0292. Through Jan. 17. . . . **danny lyon**, Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 750-7070. Through Jan. 18. . . . **diana michener**, Pace Wildenstein MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 759-7999. Through Jan. 17. . . . **john monteith**, Ricco/Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 627-4819. Through Dec. 24. . . . **marvin e. newman**, De Lellis, 47 E. 68th St. 327-1482. Through Jan. 25. . . . **jan saudek**, Sorokko, 430 West Broadway. 941-8888. Through Jan. 3. . . . **fred stein** and **peter loewy**, Saul, 560 Broadway. 431-0747. Both shows through Jan. 3. . . . **bert stern**, Staley-Wise, 560 Broadway. 966-6223. Through Jan. 10. . . . **kunié sugiura**, Tonkonow, 601 W. 26th St. 255-8450. Through Jan. 10. . . . **shellburne thurber**, Shainman, 513 W. 20th St. 645-1701. Through Dec. 20. . . . **nick waplington**, Holly Solomon, 172 Mercer St. 941-5777. Through Dec. 20.

(See the museum listings for a photography exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History.)

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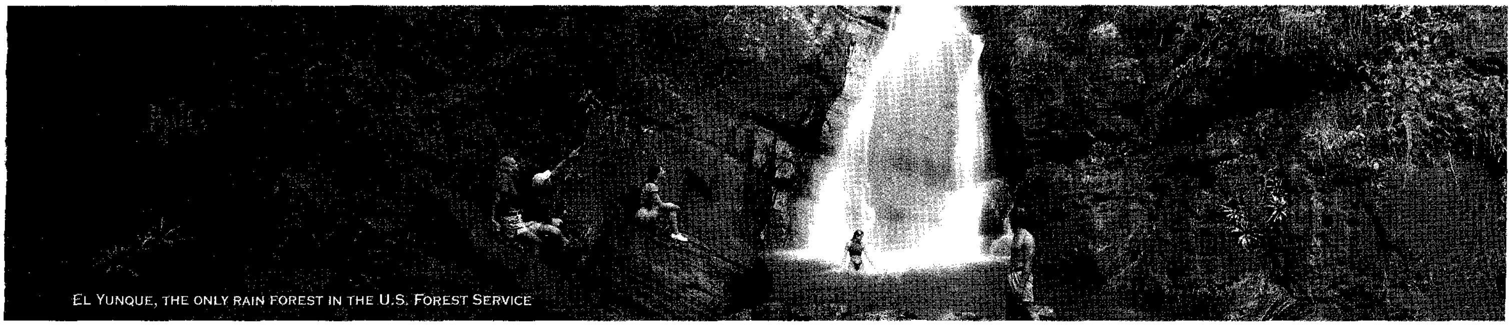
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CLASSICAL MUSIC

(The box-office number for Alice Tully Hall is 875-5050; for Avery Fisher Hall, 875-5030; for Carnegie Hall, 247-7800; and for the Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 83rd St., 570-3949.)

HOLIDAY MUSIC

Handel's "Messiah"—An interpretation for every taste. Dec. 17 at 7:30: The combined choirs of the **CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE**, with specially designed "architectural lighting." (Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 662-2133.) . . . ¶ Dec. 17 at 8: Lyndon Woodside leads the **ORATORIO SOCIETY OF NEW YORK** in its hundred-and-twenty-fifth consecutive holiday go-round of the piece. (Carnegie Hall.) . . . ¶ Dec. 18 at 7:30: Gerre Hancock directs the **SAINT THOMAS CHOIR OF MEN AND BOYS AND CONCERT ROYAL** (a baroque orchestra), with soprano Julianne Baird, countertenor Dana Marsh, tenor Todd Teske, and bass Peter Becker. (St. Thomas Church, Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. 757-7013, ext. 305.) . . . ¶ Dec. 19 at 8: **GRACE CHURCH CHORAL SOCIETY AND ORCHESTRA.** (Grace Church, Broadway at 10th St. 254-2000, ext. 105.) . . . ¶ Dec. 20 at 2:30 and 8: David Randolph leads the **ST. CECILIA CHORUS AND ORCHESTRA.** (Carnegie Hall.) . . . ¶ Dec. 22 at 8: The annual **NATIONAL CHORAL COUNCIL** sing-along. (Avery Fisher Hall.) . . . ¶ Dec. 23 at 8: **MUSICA SACRA.** (Carnegie Hall.) . . . ¶ Dec. 23 at 8: **THE CONCORDIA ORCHESTRA AND MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY CHOIR**, directed by Marin Alsop, offer their annual presentation "Too Hot to Handel," a jazz-pop-and-gospel rendering of "Messiah." (Avery Fisher Hall.)

Carolling—Dec. 19 at 7: Untamed hordes of marauding carollers—you among them?—take to the streets of the West Village. (Meet behind St. Luke In-the-Fields, 487 Hudson St., at Grove St. No tickets necessary. For further information, call 570-7301.) . . . ¶ Dec. 23 at 12:30: Lunchtime community carolling. (St. Bartholomew's Church, Park Ave. at 50th St. No tickets necessary.) . . . ¶ Dec. 24 at 5: A gathering for those who have finished their last-minute preparations. (Washington Square, near the Arch.)

Anonymous 4—The women's vocal quartet presents medieval chants, polyphonic works, and stories about the fifth-century bishop who became known as St. Nicholas. (St. Michael's Church, Amsterdam Ave. at 99th St. 678-5432. Dec. 19 at 8. . . . ¶ Medieval Sculpture Hall, Metropolitan Museum. Dec. 22 at 6:30 and 8:30.)

New York Ensemble for Early Music—Performing a pair of programs. Dec. 19 at 8, Dec. 20 at 3 and 8, and Dec. 21 at 3: A medieval holiday lineup. (St. James Chapel, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. For information about tickets, call 749-6600.) . . . ¶ Dec. 26-28 at noon and 2: A wide-ranging seasonal program. (Cloisters, Fort Tryon Park. No charge beyond museum admission.)

Little Orchestra Society—Dino Anagnost leads two separate programs. Dec. 20 at 7: A candlelight concert with the Metropolitan Singers/The Greek Choral Society. (Holy Trinity Cathedral, 319 E. 74th St. For information about tickets, call 704-2100.) . . . ¶ Dec. 27-28 at 11 A.M., 12:30, 2:30, and 4, and Dec. 29 at 4 and 5:30: A staged realization of Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf," aimed at the younger crowd. Other Russian works round out the program. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. For information about tickets, call 704-2100.)

New York Choral Society—John Daly Goodwin leads Respighi's "Laud to the Nativity," Bach's "Singet dem Herrn," and seasonal works by Holst, Janáček, and Poulenc. (Alice Tully Hall. Dec. 20 at 8.)

Beethoven's Ninth—The Japanese have embraced Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony as indispensable holiday fare. In this concert, a massed choir of three hundred singers, both Japanese and American, performs with soloists and the Kansai University Orchestra, with Yoshimi Takeda conducting. (Carnegie Hall. Dec. 21 at 2.)

Klezmerfest—A summit of Jewish soul music, with the Andy Statman Orchestra and the Klezmer Conservatory Band. (Avery Fisher Hall. Dec. 21 at 5.)

Pomerium—The a-cappella early-music ensemble, directed by Alexander Blachly, offers chant and polyphony relating to Christmas, by such Old Masters as Dufay, Josquin des Prez, Cipriano de Rore, Palestrina, Lasso, and Byrd. (Medieval Sculpture Hall, Metropolitan Museum. Dec. 21 at 6:30 and 8:30.)

Quartetto Gelato—A fun-loving foursome, playing on eight instruments, presents festive fare. (Medieval Sculpture Hall, Metropolitan Museum. Dec. 23 at 6:30 and 8:30.)

Seasonal Brass—The Canadian Brass join members of the New York Philharmonic's brass section for a wide-ranging program. (Avery Fisher Hall. Dec. 27 at 3.)

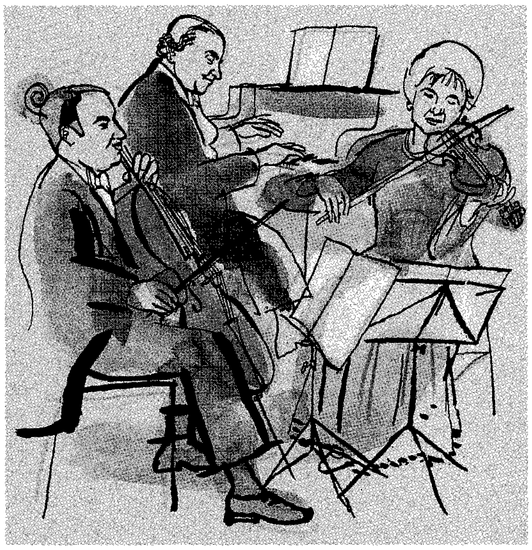
'Tis the Season—Several other groups offer widely varied holiday programs. **AMERICAN BOYCHOIR, GABRIELI BRASS, AND ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHOIR.** (St. Bartholomew's Church, Park Ave. at 50th St. 378-0248. Dec. 17 at 7:30.) . . . **NEW YORK CITY GAY MEN'S CHORUS:** With folk-singer Holly Near. (Carnegie Hall. Dec. 18-19 at 8.) . . . **GREENWICH VILLAGE SINGERS.** (St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St.

• •

LISTENING BOOTH

The torrent of new Christmas disks is divided about equally between naughty (in some cases, appalling) and nice. We'll stick to the nice. **HANDEL'S "MESSIAH"** gets excellent period-instrument readings from **PAUL MC CREESH AND THE GABRIELI CONSORT & PLAYERS**, showcasing fleet coloratura from tenor Charles Daniels (Deutsche Grammophon Archiv, two disks); and from some fast-rising stars of the East, conductor **MASAAKI SUZUKI AND THE BACH COLLEGIUM JAPAN** (BIS, two disks), a recording that offers marvellous pacing, crystalline diction from the Japanese choir, and the gorgeous timbre of countertenor Yoshikazu Mera. Bachaholics also have much to cheer: the **CHRISTMAS ORATORIO**, with René Jacobs leading the translucent, energetic Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, and lutenist Konrad Junghänel providing stunning contributions to the continuo section (Harmonia Mundi, two disks); joyous, perfectly poised performances of three of the **ADVENT CANTATAS** (No. 36, No. 61, and No. 62), with Philippe Herreweghe's Collegium Vocale (Harmonia Mundi); and a pairing of the **CANTATA NO. 63 AND THE MAGNIFICAT** (with the Christmas interpolations), buoyantly rendered, with much use of *notes inégales*, by Philip Pickett and the New London Consort (L'Oiseau-Lyre). Moving deeper into the past, consider **A CHRISTMAS COLLECTION**, wherein Paul Goodwin leads the Academy of Ancient Music in a rich Schütz and Gabrieli sampler (Harmonia Mundi); and a thrilling, spaciously recorded reading, by Musica Fiata and La Capella Ducale (Roland Wilson directing), of Michael Praetorius's lustrous motet collection of 1619, **POLYHYMNIA CADUCEATRIX & PANEGYRICA** (Sony Classical Vivarte). Looking for something older still? Try Sequentia's **AQUITANIA**, a lusty stab at re-creating what people heard in the monasteries of Aquitaine at this season back in the twelfth century (Deutsche Harmonia Mundi/BMG); and **HYMNES DE NOËL** (Jade/BMG), which shows off the amazing Greek Byzantine Choir, of Athens (directed by the eminent Lycourgos Angelopoulos), singing ancient modes and intervals you may never have heard before. Berlioz's sacred trilogy **L'ENFANCE DU CHRIST**, with Herreweghe directing, is notable for the ear-opening sounds of the Orchestre des Champs Élysées (Harmonia Mundi; two disks); and, for seasonal background music, **REJOICE!: A STRING QUARTET CHRISTMAS, VOL. 2**, with violinist Arturo Delmoni and friends, provides well-played, tasteful arrangements of familiar carols (John Marks Records).

Dec. 19 at 8. For information about tickets, call 642-8176.) . . . **BOYS CHOIR OF HARLEM.** (Avery Fisher Hall. Dec. 20 at 3.) . . . **CANTICUM NOVUM SINGERS.** (St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. Dec. 20 at 8. Tickets at the door.) . . . ¶ St. Ignatius' Episcopal Church, West End Ave. at 87th St. Dec. 21 at 3. Tickets at the door.) . . . **CHOIRS AND STRINGS OF ST. IGNATIUS LOYOLA.** (Park Ave. at 84th St. 288-2520. Dec. 21 at 4.) . . . **KYIV CHAMBER CHOIR:** Performing a-cappella Ukrainian Christmas selections. (Carnegie Hall. Dec. 21 at 8.)



The Beaux Arts Trio, at the Metropolitan Museum.

LUCINDA ROGERS

OPERA

Metropolitan Opera—**IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA**, with Vesselina Kasarova, Bruce Ford, Dwayne Croft, Paul Plishka, and Simone Alaimo; conducted by Edoardo Müller. (Dec. 17 at 7:30, Dec. 20 at 1:30, Dec. 24 at 7, and Dec. 27 at 8.) . . . **DON CARLO,** with Aprile Millo, Barbara Dever, Fabio Armiliato, Thomas Hampson, Francesco Ellero D'Artegna, and Vladimir Ognovenko; Myung Whun Chung. (Dec. 18 at 7.) . . . With Marina Mescheriakova, Dolora Zajick, Luis Lima, Mr. Hampson, James Morris, and Mr. Ognovenko; Mr. Chung. (Dec. 23 at 7 and Dec. 27 at 12:30.) . . . **BORIS GODUNOV,** with Olga Borodina and Samuel Ramey; Valery Gergiev. (Dec. 19, Dec. 22, Dec. 26, and Dec. 30, all at 7:30.) . . . **DON GIOVANNI,** with Carolyn James, Amanda Roocroft, Maria Bayo, Paul Groves, Håkan Hagegård, and Ildebrando D'Arcangelo; Daniel Beckwith. (Dec. 20 at 8.) . . . **PETER GRIMES,** with Patricia Racette, Philip Langridge, and Alan Opie; David Atherton. (Dec. 29 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000.)

Opera Nova—Presenting Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel" (in English), with the action transposed to the streets and tenements of New York. (Sanford Meisner Theatre, 164 Eleventh Ave., at 22nd St. Dec. 17-19 at 7:30; Dec. 20 at 2 and 7:30; and Dec. 21 at 3:30. For information about tickets, call 543-9662.)

Juilliard Opera Center—The final performance of a more traditional "Hänsel und Gretel," with Jennifer Marquette and Sari Gruber in the title roles and Randall Behr conducting. (Juilliard Theatre, 155 W. 65th St. 769-7406. Dec. 17 at 8.)

Amato Opera Company—Presenting "Die Fledermaus." (Amato Opera Theatre, 319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 228-8200. Dec. 19-20 and Dec. 27 at 7:30, and Dec. 28 at 2:30. Through Jan. 4. . . . **NOTE:** On Dec. 27 at 11:30 and 2:30, the company also presents family performances of Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors.")

Dicapo Opera Theatre—Final performances of Tchaikovsky's "Iolanta." (184 E. 76th St. 288-9438. Dec. 19-20 at 8 and Dec. 21 at 3.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

New York Philharmonic—Kurt Masur conducts Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1 (with Midori) and a suite from Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet." (Avery Fisher Hall. Dec. 17-20 at 8.)

New York String Orchestra—At this time every year, promising young string players gather in New York for intensive training that culminates in performances at Carnegie Hall. Jaime Laredo presides at the podium. Dec. 24 at 7: Works by Handel, Mozart, Bach, and Tchaikovsky (his Serenade for Strings). . . . ¶ Dec. 28 at 2: Vaughan Williams's "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis," George Walker's "Lyric for Strings," and Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 4 (with Cho-Liang Lin) and Symphony No. 29.

New York Chamber Symphony—Anthony Newman conducts (and serves as organist in) a program that includes three of Handel's Coronation Anthems and five of Mozart's "Epistle Sonatas"; with the New York Chamber Symphony Chorus. (Alice Tully Hall. Dec. 27 at 8 and Dec. 28 at 5.)

P.D.Q. Bach—Music's nuttiest professor, Peter Schickele, swings into town (and sometimes into the auditorium, on an ersatz grapevine) to perform his latest musicological discoveries, putatively written by the oddest of Johann Sebastian's twenty-odd children. This season's attractions include an appearance by "The Three Bargain-Counter-Tenors," which Professor Schickele, displaying his characteristic modesty, proclaims to be "the musical event of the millennium." (Carnegie Hall. Dec. 27 and Dec. 29 at 8.)

RECITALS

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center—Thrice traversing Bach's six "Brandenburg" Concertos. (Alice Tully Hall. Dec. 18 at 7:30, Dec. 19 at 8, and Dec. 21 at 5.)

Bargemusic—Dec. 18 at 7:30 and Dec. 21 at 4: Presenting Mozart's C-Minor String Quartet (K. 406) and Dvořák's E-Flat-Major String Quintet (Op. 97). . . . ¶ Dec. 22 and Dec. 24 at 7:30: A sure sign of the year's end is the return of Bach's "Brandenburg" Concertos to Bargemusic's calendar. In the opening performances of this "Brandenburg" season, twenty-one musicians gather to play the Concertos No. 1, No. 2, and No. 4. . . . ¶ Dec. 28 at 7:30: The Concertos No. 6, No. 5, and No. 3. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-4061.)

Robert White and Eliot Fisk—The tenor and the guitarist team up to perform songs by Fauré, Granados, and Albéniz, as well as traditional songs of Ireland (a specialty of Mr. White's) and several selections from Renaissance France and England. (Metropolitan Museum. Dec. 18 at 8.)

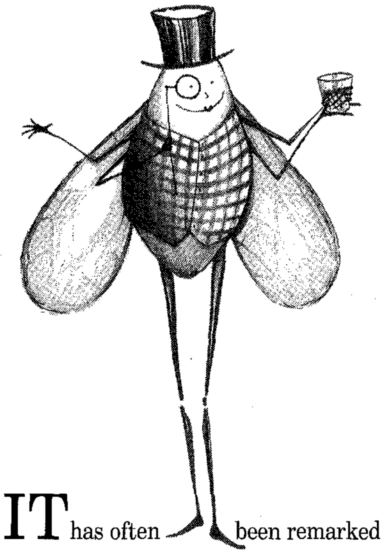
Beaux Arts Trio—Founded in 1955, this ensemble has spent more than four decades as the piano trio against which all others are judged. The group's personnel has changed over the years, but pianist Menahem Pressler, a founding member, remains the jovial anchor, and Peter Wiley has been the cellist for a decade. Ida Kavafian is the newcomer, having acceded to the violin chair just five and a half years ago. In this concert, the threesome performs trios by Haydn (No. 27, in C Major), Schubert (his Notturno), Shostakovich (his First, in C Minor), and Schumann (in D Minor). (Metropolitan Museum. Dec. 19-20 at 8.)

Sundays on the Island—Dec. 21 at noon: Violinist Steven Copes, who serves as concertmaster of the Colorado Symphony, performs Saint-Saëns's Sonata No. 2, as well as works by Sarasate and Kreisler; pianist Reiko Uchida assists. . . . ¶ Dec. 28 at noon: Presenting pianists Monica Chung (performing works by Beethoven and Chopin) and Yuri Kim (in music by Debussy).

HAMISH

NOT

SQUEAMISH



IT has often been remarked that devotees of The Macallan Malt Whisky nurture an almost mystical belief in the 'water of life' qualities of their favourite dram. But seldom has it found such expression as in the following true anecdote kindly related to us by Mr C. Wemyss of Ravenhead, Notts.

'My friend Hamish, at a pre-Christmas party in my garden, found a fly had landed in his glass, and drowned. "Don't worry, Hamish," said I. "Have another Macallan in a clean glass." "I shall do nothing of the sort," he replied, removing the tiny creature from his glass and sipping the sherry-gold elixir.

"The Macallan never hurt a fly, and nor does a fly hurt The Macallan!" Ten minutes later indeed the insect stirred and flew off.

"There you are," said Hamish triumphantly. "And now you can give me a *gnat's more*." '

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The Cobra Event
Dec. 8 / 9pm ET

Edward Fiske
Fiske Guide to Colleges 1998
Dec. 9 / 8pm ET

David Darlington
Area 51: The Dreamland Chronicles
Dec. 10 / 8pm ET

Katherine Ramsland
Dean Koontz: A Writer's Biography
Dec. 11 / 8pm ET

Madison Smartt Bell
Ten Indians
Dec. 12 / 8pm ET

George Plimpton
Truman Capote
Dec. 14 / 7pm ET

Dominick Dunne
Another City, Not My Own
Dec. 15 / 8pm ET

Bud Greenspan
Frozen In Time
Dec. 16 / 8pm ET

Linda Howard
Upon A Midnight Clear
Dec. 17 / 7pm ET

Peter Kwong
Forbidden Workers
Dec. 18 / 7pm ET

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(Le Refuge Inn, 620 City Island Ave., City Island, the Bronx. 718-885-2478.)

Ambrosia Trio—The ensemble offers piano trios by Haydn and Dvořák, and violist Christine Ims assists in Fauré's C-Minor Piano Quartet. (St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. Dec. 21 at 2. Tickets at the door.)

Salon Soirées—Dec. 21 at 6 and 8: The Canadian violinist Lara St. John's recordings on the Well-Tempered Productions label reveal a technically adept, terrifically expressive talent. The Canadian government recently provided her a Stradivarius on extended loan (talk about supporting the arts!), which can only further her progress. In this recital, she performs Bach's E-Minor Sonata (BWV 1023) and Beethoven's G-Major Sonata (Op. 96), with pianist Ilan Rechtman assisting in both. . . . ¶ Dec. 28 at 6 and 8: Monica Chung offers piano works by Mozart, Schubert, and Liszt. (Hotel Wales, Madison Ave. at 92nd St. No tickets necessary.)

At the Mansfield—Dec. 22 at 8: Violinist Steven Copes and pianist Reiko Uchida offer works by Handel, Brahms, and Kreisler. . . . ¶ Dec. 29 at 8: Music for piano four-hands, performed by Susan Sobolewsky and Eleonor Bindman. (Mansfield Hotel, 12 W. 44th St. No tickets necessary.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

O Frabjous Day!—In anticipation of the centennial of Lewis Carroll's death, on January 14, New York University has mounted an exhibition of the letters, manuscripts, and first editions of the English writer, mathematician, and photographer otherwise known as Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. In addition to displays of Carroll's creative output—puzzles, games, anagrams, and photographs, including a pouting self-portrait—the show features translations of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and such "adaptations" of the book as an A.C.L.U. pamphlet on the legal system called "Alice in Justice-Land" and the Continental Bank & Trust Company's brochure "Alice in Trustland." (Bobst Library, Third Floor, New York University, 70 Washington Sq. S. For more information, call 998-2596. Through Feb. 1.)

Seasonal Tracks—Phil Kline, composer and master of the tape recorder, leads an ad-hoc ensemble of some forty boom-box-toting carollers—each playing a taped part of his work "Carol (Unsilent Night)"—on a march through the streets of Greenwich Village. Those who bring their own boom box get to keep the tape. (Dec. 20 at 7, starting at the Arch in Washington Square. For more information, call 227-6255.)

Circus Oz—Live rock music and an absence of elephants, tigers, and dancing bears are signs that this circus isn't from Kansas. Indeed, these thirteen trapeze artists, tightrope walkers, and acrobats hail from the other side of the world, namely Melbourne, Australia, and so does their idea of what a circus is. Keep your eye on the upside-down roof walkers. (New Victory, 209 W. 42nd St. 239-6200. Through Jan. 4.)

Reading—Dec. 17 at 6: By Phillip Lopate, from his book of essays "Portrait of My Body"; Veronica Chambers, from her novel "Mama's Girl"; and Brooklyn's poet laureate, Dennis Nurske, from his collection "Voices Over Water." (Rotunda Gallery, 33 Clinton St., Brooklyn. For reservations, which are required, call 718-855-7882, ext. 53.)

Talk—Dec. 18 at 6: Journalist Nat Hentoff discusses his new book, "Speaking Freely: A Memoir." (Newseum/NY, 580 Madison Ave., at 56th St. For reservations, which are required, call 317-7593.)

Walks—Big Onion Walking Tours offers a few holiday options. Dec. 24 at 1: A Christmas Eve stroll through Greenwich Village, including a stop at St. Luke In-the-Fields for a reading of Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas." . . . ¶ Dec. 25 at 10 A.M. and 1: Tours of the Jewish Lower East Side. For information, call 439-1090.

BOOK CURRENTS

Family Plots

THE particularly American idea of the perfect family—one nourished by pleasant Sunday-afternoon phone chats and the occasional holiday sing-along—has lost a good deal of its currency. These days, we're more likely to think of them as slightly menacing creatures, propelled as much by frustration, resentment, and jealousy as they are by love. And yet even dysfunction can have its own peculiar beauty.

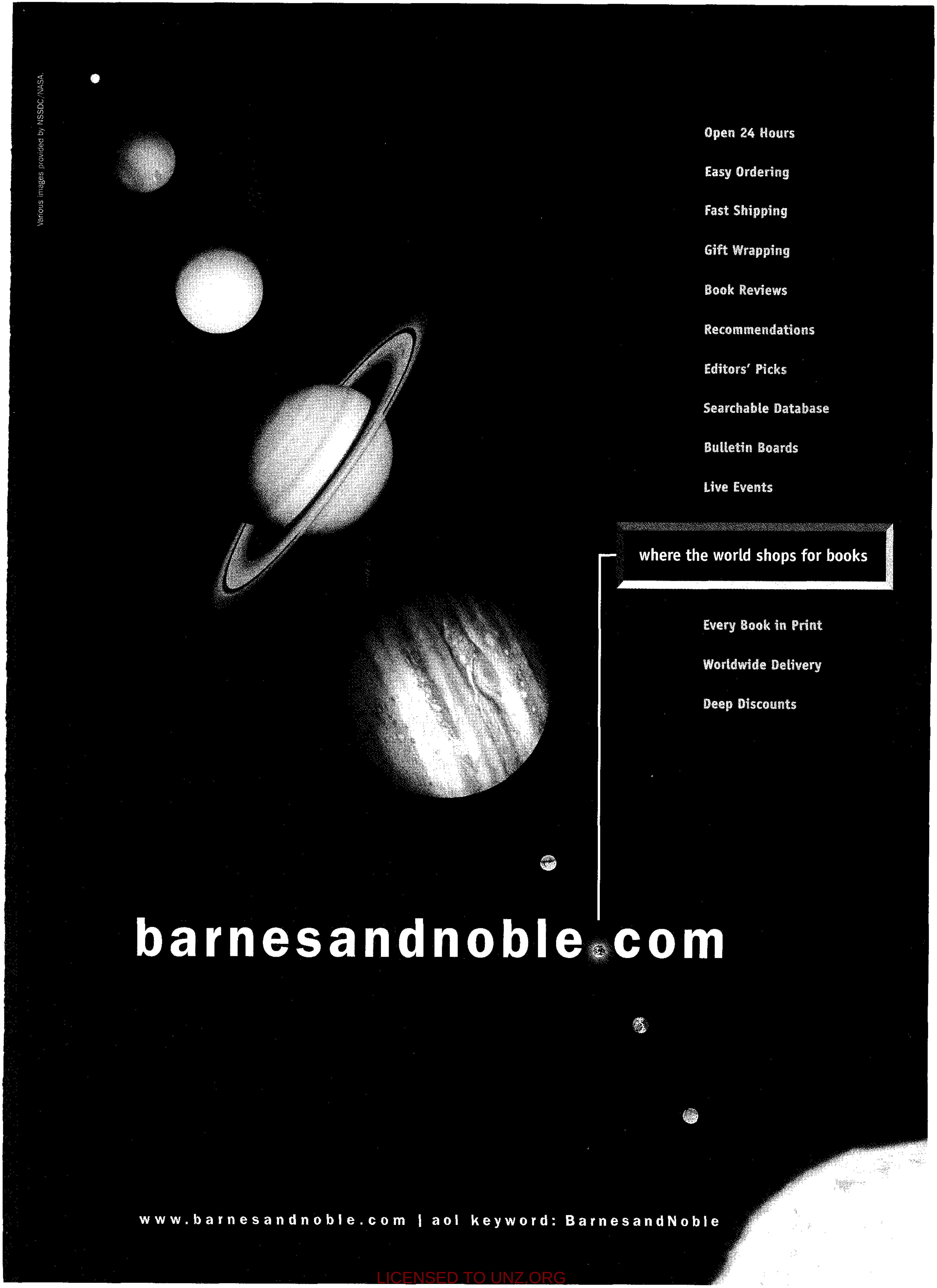
Rick Moody

For Rick Moody, whose recently filmed novel, THE ICE STORM (Little Brown), limns with precision, humor, and empathy the bruised emotional life of one New England family in the nineteen-seventies, the idea of family leads immediately to Dostoyevsky. "In my mind, the preëminent novel about family is THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, a really great, dark, hideous portrait of how strung-out a family can get." But he also turns to Hawthorne's New England, circa 1850: "THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES is a pretty great multigenerational saga."

Among contemporary works, the book that for Moody best captures the notion of family is Susan Minot's first novel, MONKEYS (Pocket Books). When he was a young reader, he notes, the works "that most conveyed family to me were the Glass stories, by Salinger—FRANNY AND ZOOEY and RAISE HIGH THE ROOF BEAM, CARPENTERS [Little Brown]. But I also now like Cheever's Wapshot sequence quite a bit."

Comparing THE WAPSHOT CHRONICLE (Random House), John Cheever's first novel, with the writer's better known short stories, Moody says, "There's so much struggle in that project that for me it gets a lot closer to the bone, particularly the ending. It ends with this incredible letter from the father to his sons. It's really beautiful." The letter includes advice about not transporting whisky across the borders of dry states or counties in a hot-water bottle ("Rubber will spoil taste.") and other words of wisdom: "Never sleep in moonlight. Known by scientists to induce madness. . . . Fear tastes like a rusty knife and do not let her into your house. Courage tastes of blood. Stand up straight. Admire the world. Relish the love of a gentle woman. Trust in the Lord." Perfect advice for an imperfect universe.

LEANNE SHAPTON



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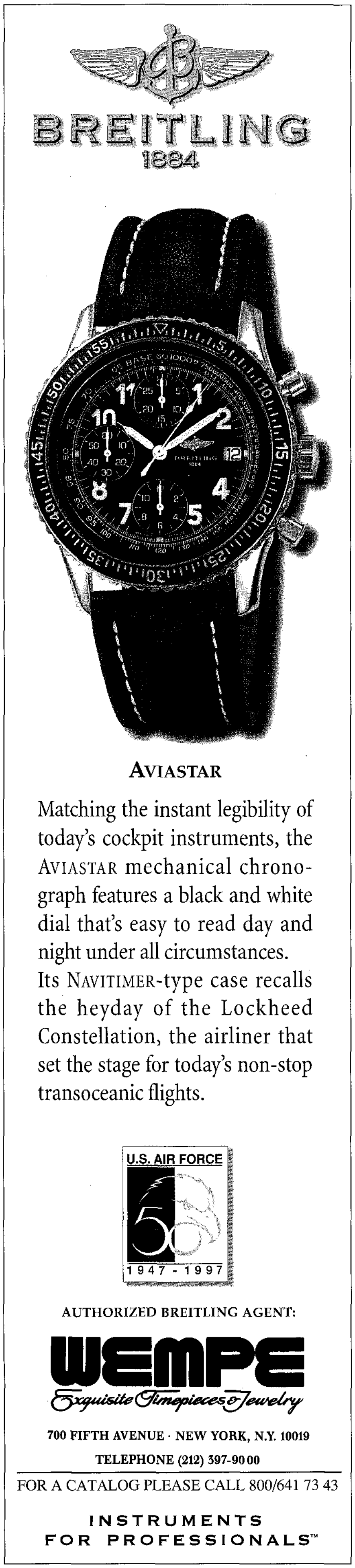

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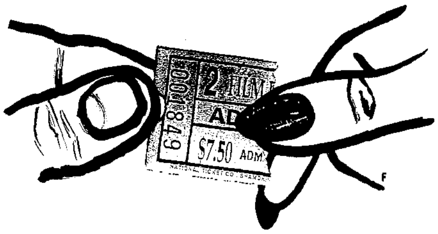


THE MOVIES

OPENINGS

Afterglow—In Alan Rudolph's romantic comedy-drama, two couples (Nick Nolte and Julie Christie, Lara Flynn Boyle and Jonny Lee Miller) unknowingly swap spouses. Opening Dec. 26. (Angelika Film Center and Regency.)

An American Werewolf in Paris—A horror thriller about a travelling student (Tom Everett Scott) and a beautiful girl (Julie Delpy) who, at the full moon, gains a new personality. Directed by Anthony Waller. Opening Dec. 25.

The Apostle—Robert Duvall wrote, directed, and stars in a film about the transformation of a defrocked minister. Dec. 17-23. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

As Good As It Gets—Jack Nicholson, Helen Hunt, and Greg Kinnear play New Yorkers brought together by a dog, in a comedy co-written (with Mark Andrus) and directed by James L. Brooks. Opening Dec. 23.

The Education of Little Tree—In writer-director Richard Friedenberg's film, the grandparents of a young Cherokee boy teach him the ways of their ancestors. Opening Dec. 25.

Jackie Brown—Pam Grier stars as a double-dealing smuggler, in Quentin Tarantino's adaptation of the Elmore Leonard novel "Rum Punch." Opening Dec. 25.

Kundun—Martin Scorsese's chronicle of the early years of Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama. Opening Dec. 25. (Lincoln Square.)

Ma Vie en Rose—The story of a little boy (Georges du Fresne) convinced he is a little girl. Directed by Alain Berliner. In French. Opening Dec. 26. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Quad Cinema.)

Mr. Magoo—Leslie Nielsen brings the myopic old gentleman to life, in Stanley Tong's film. Opening Dec. 25. (84th Street Sixplex, 86th Street East Twin, Embassy 2, 19th Street East 6, Sutton, and Village East Cinemas.)

MouseHunt—A comedy about brothers (Nathan Lane and Lee Evans) who inherit an old house and its troublesome rodent. Directed by Gore Verbinski. Opening Dec. 19. (Criterion Center and 64th and 2nd.)

The Postman—Kevin Costner directed and stars in this vision of a post-apocalyptic America. Opening Dec. 25. (Coronet Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, Village Theatre VII, and Ziegfeld.)

Titanic—Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 19.

Tomorrow Never Dies—A media mogul (Jonathan Pryce) is the villain in the newest James Bond film, starring Pierce Brosnan as 007. Directed by Roger Spottiswoode. Opening Dec. 19. (Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, 84th Street Sixplex, First & 62nd Cinemas, Metro Cinema, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Showplace, and Village Theatre VII.)

Wag the Dog—A comedy in which a Washington spin doctor (Robert De Niro) and a movie producer (Dustin Hoffman) set out to con the nation. Directed by Barry Levinson, from a screenplay by Hilary Henkin and David Mamet. Opening Dec. 25.

Will It Snow for Christmas?—Reviewed below in Film Notes. Dec. 17-30.

The Winter Guest—Alan Rickman directed this drama about a mother and daughter, played by Emma Thompson and her real mother, Phyllida Law. Opening Dec. 24. (Paris.)

FILM NOTES

(If a movie has been reviewed recently in The Current Cinema, the date of its review is given.)

Alien Resurrection—This fourth film in the series, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, follows the predictable suspense track: stuck in space, a complacent company of men and women is snacked into submission by one or more slavering bugs. On the menu this time are Brad Dourif, Dan Hedaya, a rather unwell-looking Winona Ryder, and, of course, Sigourney Weaver. The movie repels far more readily than it excites.—*Anthony Lane* (12/1/97) (Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, 84th Street Sixplex, 86th Street East Twin, First & 62nd Cinemas, 34th Street Showplace, and Village East Cinemas.)

Amistad—Steven Spielberg's film about a slave revolt in 1839. (Coronet Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, State, and Village Theatre VII.)

Anastasia—Directors Don Bluth and Gary Goldman have simplified and Cinderella-ized the Anastasia story for this opulent cartoon musical: a lost girl must discover the princess inside her. The film doesn't burst through any of the genre's limitations (the Broadway-style numbers still sound old-fashioned), but it's presented at an entertaining clip, and viewers who manage to leave the hype at the door can have some fun.—*Bruce Diones* (Art Greenwich Twin, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, 59th Street East Cinema, Murray Hill Cinemas, Olympia, and Orpheum VII. . . . ¶ Ziegfeld; through Dec. 24.)

Boogie Nights—Mark Wahlberg (once better known as Marky Mark) is a busboy who becomes the most successful product of the porn producer Jack Horner, played with a rangy bantam cock's swagger by Burt Reynolds. Wahlberg, who plays his part with baffled sweetness, is surrounded by the most interesting ensemble cast since "The Player," including William H. Macy, Julianne Moore, and Heather Graham. The picture is set in Los Angeles in the late seventies and early eighties, and, in the hands of the talented young director Paul Thomas Anderson, it gradually takes on the feel of a "Nashville"-like epic.—*Daphne Merkin* (10/13/97) (Cinema 3rd Avenue, Embassy 4, Lincoln Square, and Village East Cinemas.)

Cabin in the Sky (1943)—This was the first film Vincente Minnelli directed, and his approach was fresh and enthusiastic. It's a joyful, stylized treatment of faux-naïf Negro folklore, with an all-black cast, and it's one of the best musicals ever made in this country. It becomes even better with the years: now, it's easier to ignore the weaknesses in the script, because it's so exciting to see legendary artists, such as Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong, and Bubbles (John William Sublett), as they were in the forties. The cast includes Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Rex Ingram, Duke Ellington and his orchestra, and the Hall Johnson Choir.—*Pauline Kael* (A Different Light Bookstore; Dec. 21.)

Deconstructing Harry—Woody Allen's new comedy, set in New York City. (Cinema I, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, and Village East Cinemas.)

Eve's Bayou—For her first film, the writer and director Kasi Lemmons attempts to adapt Tennessee Williams's Southern-gothic style to an African-American context. Eve, the heroine (Jurnee Smollett), a ten-year-old bourgeois Creole in late-fifties rural Louisiana, is trying to understand why her mother (an intense, elegant Lynn Whitfield) is so frigid and why her beloved father (a subdued Samuel L. Jackson) is addicted to fooling around. As long as the film sticks to Eve's point of view it's got a naïve charm; unfortunately, Lemmons mixes in Magic Realist fantasies of African voodoo and black-and-white sequences that feel less poetic than arty.—*Sarah Kerr* (Eastside Playhouse and 19th Street East 6.)

Fast, Cheap & Out of Control—Errol Morris has made another unclassifiable documentary. This time around he focusses on a lion tamer, a topiary gardener, a mole-rat expert, and an M.I.T. robotics scientist, interweaving interviews with his eccentric but remarkably unkooky subjects with stock footage, old movies, and cartoons. The result is an alternately comic and haunting meditation.—*D.M.* (Film Forum 3.)

Flubber—This remake of the 1961 fluff classic "The Absent-Minded Professor" achieves the impossible: the usually hyperactive Robin Williams is overshadowed here by special effects. John Hughes co-wrote the script (with Bill Walsh), packing it with a nasty violence reminiscent of his "Home Alone" series. Directed by Les Mayfield.—*S.K.* (Chelsea West, Guild, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema, Orpheum VII, Sutton, and Village East Cinemas.)

For Richer or Poorer—Tim Allen and Kirstie Alley star in a romantic comedy directed by Bryan Spicer, about a New York couple hiding out from the I.R.S. in Amish country. (Chelsea Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Square, National Twin, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, and Waverly.)

The Full Monty—An amiable light comedy, directed by Peter Cattaneo, about six unemployed British steelworkers who mount an all-male strip show for cash. The script, by Simon Beaufoy, is clean and well developed. Each character is given his bit to do, and when the motley crew comes together the actors all work wonderfully with one another, finding a sexy, warm performance rhythm as they gyrate to some classic seventies disco. Two actors—Mark Addy, who plays an overweight, insecure worker, and Robert Carlyle, as the ringleader—are sensational.—*B.D.* (Embassy 3, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Quad Cinema.)

Good Will Hunting—A drama written by and starring Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, about a troubled young man with a photographic memory. Directed by Gus Van Sant. Also starring Robin Williams and Minnie Driver. (Angelika Film Center, Chelsea West, Lincoln Square, and New York Twin.)

Home Alone 3—Eight-year-old Alex (Alex D. Linz) is home with the chicken pox when a gang of thieves tries to invade his house. Written by John Hughes and directed by Raja Gosnell. (Art Greenwich Twin, Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Square, National Twin, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, and 64th and 2nd.)

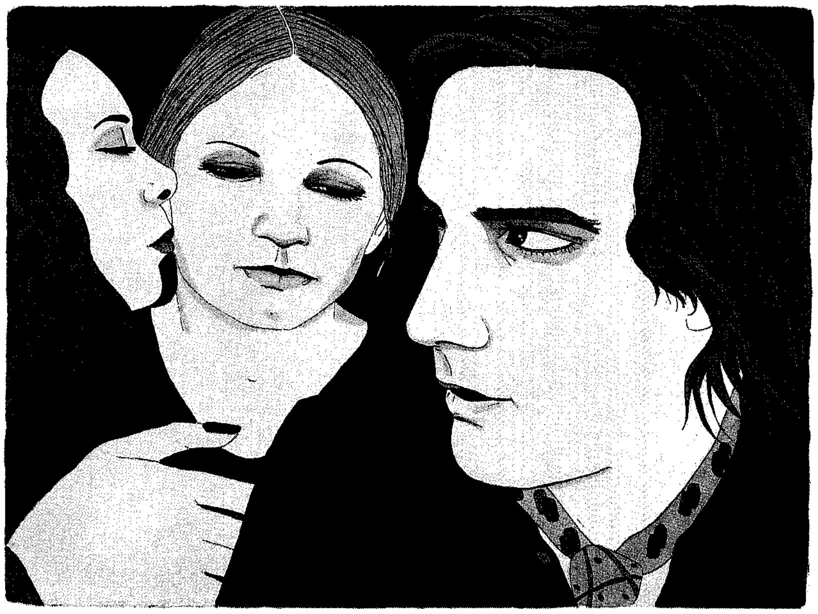
The Ice Storm—Ang Lee's treatment of Rick Moody's novel about suburban anomie is intelligent but curiously remote. Set in New Canaan, Connecticut, in 1973, it focusses on two troubled families, and it benefits from Lee's gently ironic touch: he's less interested in assigning blame for all the misery than in simply documenting the way it spreads and gets absorbed. With Kevin Kline, Joan Allen, Sigourney Weaver, and, among the adolescents, Elijah Wood and Christina Ricci.—*D.M.* (9/29/97) (Angelika Film Center, Cinema II, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Murray Hill Cinemas.)

The Jackal—An international thriller directed by Michael Caton-Jones and loosely based on the 1973 classic "The Day of the Jackal." Bruce Willis is the villainous master of disguises out to assassinate an important political figure, Richard Gere an imprisoned I.R.A. terrorist brought in to track him down. Though Gere is game, Willis barely registers: his character is humorless, and so is this dryly competent film.—*B.D.* (Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, 84th Street Sixplex, First & 62nd Cinemas, Metro Cinema, and Orpheum VII.)

John Grisham's The Rainmaker—The Mississippi novelist gets more than he deserves in Francis Ford Coppola's entertaining adaptation of his formulaic best-seller. As in previous Grisham-based films, a young, earnest lawyer (nicely underplayed here by Matt Damon) is out to right a gross injustice (this time a manipulative insurance company's refusal to pay); what differentiates the film from its predecessors is the energy and warmth Coppola packs into the standard plot. He coaxes playfully arch performances from some substantial character actors (Danny DeVito, Jon Voight, Mary Kay Place, Dean Stockwell) and slows his directing to a leisurely pace, all but eliminating his disruptive fast cutting and allowing his actors, rather than his showmanship, to carry the scenes. The movie offers a hopeful glimpse of what this great director can still do when his saner instincts prevail.—*B.D.* (East 85th Street, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Olympia, 34th Street Showplace, and Waverly. . . . ¶ Astor Plaza; through Dec. 18.)

Kiss or Kill—An outback thriller by the Australian writer-director Bill Bennett, about criminal lovers (Matt Day and Frances O'Connor) who start to suspect each other of the murders committed around them while they're on the run. Bennett and his cast expertly navigate the twists and turns of the road-movie genre, bringing this eerie example to a witty and satisfying conclusion.—*B.D.* (Quad Cinema.)

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil—Clint Eastwood brings a crisp directorial touch to John Berendt's baroque best-seller about murder in Savannah. Kevin Spacey plays an an-



LARA TOMLIN

At Film Forum 2, Françoise Lebrun, Bernadette Lafont, and Jean-Pierre Léaud in "The Mother and the Whore."

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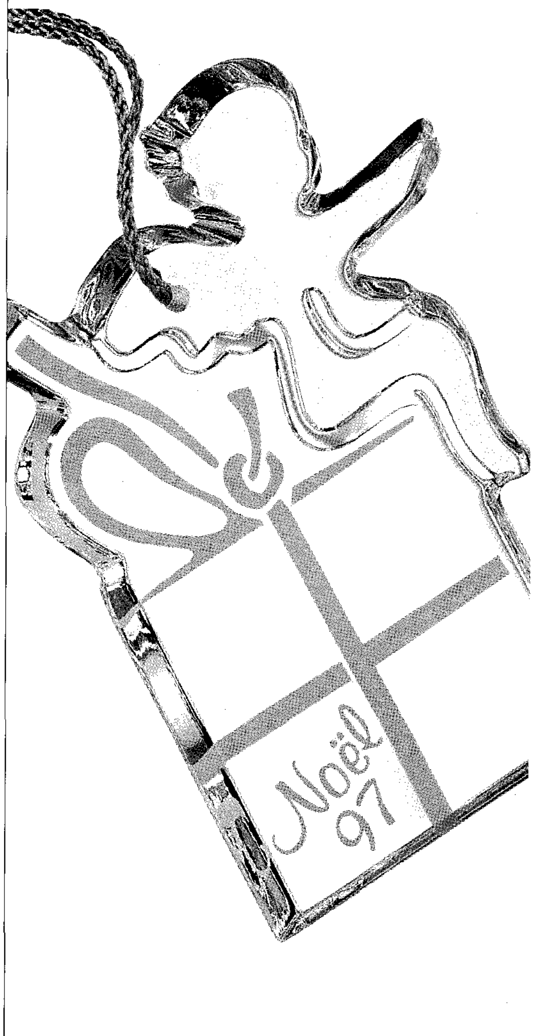

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tique dealer who kills his much younger lover (Jude Law) in what may or may not be self-defense; Spacey's slightly unsettling habit of seeming to be watching us at least as much as we watch him—aided by the black contact lenses he wears here—is particularly suited to this unreadable figure. John Cusack plays the only completely invented character in the movie, a New York writer, with cool, appraising eyes and a mouth that hangs open in a state of constant surprise. A black transvestite chanteuse who goes by the name of the Lady Chablis (played by the real Lady Chablis) eats up the screen whenever she appears. And Alison Eastwood, the director's daughter, makes much of her small role as Cusack's romantic interest.—*D.M.* (12/8/97) (Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 72nd Street East, State, and Village Theatre VII.)

Modern Times (1936)—After "City Lights," which was silent, with a musical accompaniment and sound effects, Charlie Chaplin was absent from the screen for five years; he returned in triumph with this rambunctious comedy in which he still doesn't speak, although he uses background sounds and, as a singing waiter in a crowded cabaret, he does a wonderful jabberwocky patter song that you can't get out of your head. As a worker on an assembly line, Charlie the tramp can't take a second off work to scratch himself without turning the whole plant into chaos. The picture is about the social disorders of the thirties, and there are clashes between the unemployed and the police, and a gag about a Communist demonstration, yet it's one of the happiest and most lighthearted of the Chaplin pictures—partly because his new leading lady, Paulette Goddard, has a beautiful grin and a bouncy, outgoing personality. And with the use of more sound, Chaplin seems to drop some of his pathos; this picture doesn't pull at your heartstrings—it has the spirit of a good vaudeville show.—*P.K.* (Film Forum 2; Dec. 26-30.)

Notorious (1946)—Alfred Hitchcock's amatory thriller stars Ingrid Bergman as the daughter of a Nazi, a shady lady who trades secrets and all sorts of things with American agent Cary Grant. The suspense is terrific: Will suspicious, passive Grant succeed in making Bergman seduce him, or will he take over? The honor of the American male is saved by a hairbreadth, but Bergman is literally ravishing in what is probably her sexiest performance. Great trash, great fun. With Claude Rains, Louis Calhern, Madame Konstantin, and Reinhold Schunzel. The script is by Ben Hecht.—*P.K.* (Museum of Modern Art; Dec. 19 and Dec. 27.)

The Pink Panther (1964)—The first in the series of Blake Edwards comedies featuring Peter Sellers' maladroit Inspector Clouseau has a surprisingly cosmopolitan blend of caper, cuckoldry, and pratfalls. Both Sir Charles Lytton (David Niven)—who is also the notorious jewel thief the Phantom—and Lytton's con-artist nephew (Robert Wagner) woo Clouseau's wife (Capucine) while the inspector is trying to prevent the theft of the fabulous Pink Panther diamond; by the end, even the gem's owner, the exotic Princess Darla (Claudia Cardinale), is conspiring against him. Clouseau, however, proves clumsy and unsinkable. With his stilted, intensely self-important bearing, he's an almost archetypal character—the man of injured dignity who won't admit his injury. The movie provides a pleasant, snowy dream of the high life, but its best moments are Clouseau's, as he wags a finger that lands in someone else's nose, or cools off a burned hand by stuffing it in a friend's stein of beer. Edwards and Maurice Richlin wrote the script.—*Michael Sragow* (Whitney Museum; Dec. 18-20.)

Scream 2—Director Wes Craven and screenwriter Kevin Williamson bring their "Scream" characters back for a reunion. (Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, First & 62nd Cinemas, Orpheum VII, State, 34th Street Showplace, and Village Theatre VII.)

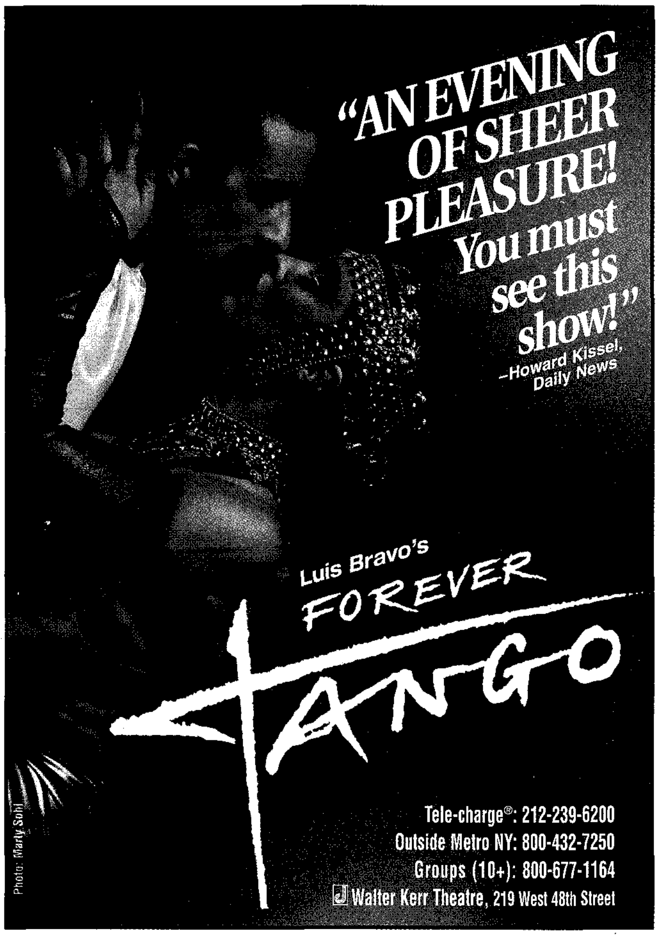
The Sweet Hereafter—An exquisitely sober movie by Atom Egoyan, based on the novel by Russell Banks. Ian Holm holds the screen with volcanic force as a big-city lawyer trying to bring a class-action suit on behalf of a small blue-collar town in the wake of a school-bus accident. The cast is uniformly good, and Sarah Polley, as a paralyzed survivor of the crash, is extraordinary.—*D.M.* (11/24/97) (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

Titanic—At well over three hours, James Cameron's grand new picture has plenty of romance to get through before it breaks the vessel in half. Leonardo DiCaprio plays the freewheeling Jack, who wins a steerage ticket and finds himself falling for the wealthy Rose (Kate Winslet), to the disapproval of her mother (Frances Fisher). The social animus of the story, like its imaginative majesty, is Dickensian: Cameron presumes that first-class passengers are either imprisoned souls, like Rose, or brutes, like her fiancé, Cal (Billy Zane). The movie delivers old-fashioned morality wrapped in the latest technology; far from foundering, however, it functions beautifully, and the eventual devastation drowns you with gusto and pathos. This all feels like two hundred million dollars well spent. With Kathy Bates, Bill Paxton, Gloria Stuart, and the estimable Victor Garber as the ship's builder.—*A.L.* (12/15/97) (Astor Plaza, Chelsea West, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Showplace, and Village Theatre VII.)

THEATRE ADDRESSES

(For show times, call 777-FILM, except where noted.)

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Art Greenwich Twin, Greenwich Ave. at 12th St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema I, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema II, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema 3rd Avenue, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St.
Coronet Cinemas, Third Ave. at 59th St.
Criterion Center, Broadway at 44th St.
East 85th Street, First Ave. at 85th St.
Eastside Playhouse, Third Ave. at 55th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
86th Street East Twin, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Embassy I, Broadway at 46th St.
Embassy 2, 3, and 4, Seventh Ave. at 47th St.
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
Gotham Cinema, Third Ave. at 58th St.
Guild, 33 W. 50th St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Cinema I and 2, Broadway at 99th St.
Murray Hill Cinemas, 160 E. 34th St.
National Twin, Broadway at 44th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 67th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
Regency, Broadway at 67th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
State, Broadway at 45th St.
Sutton I and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Showplace, 238 E. 34th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Waverly I and 2, Sixth Ave. at 3rd St.
Worldwide Cinemas, 50th St. between Eighth and Ninth Aves.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.



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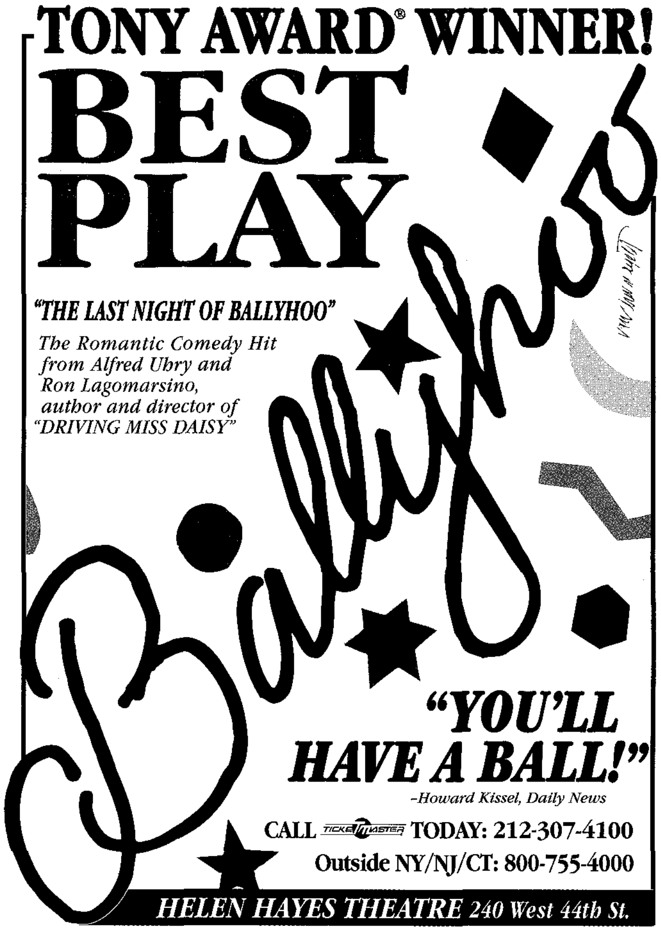

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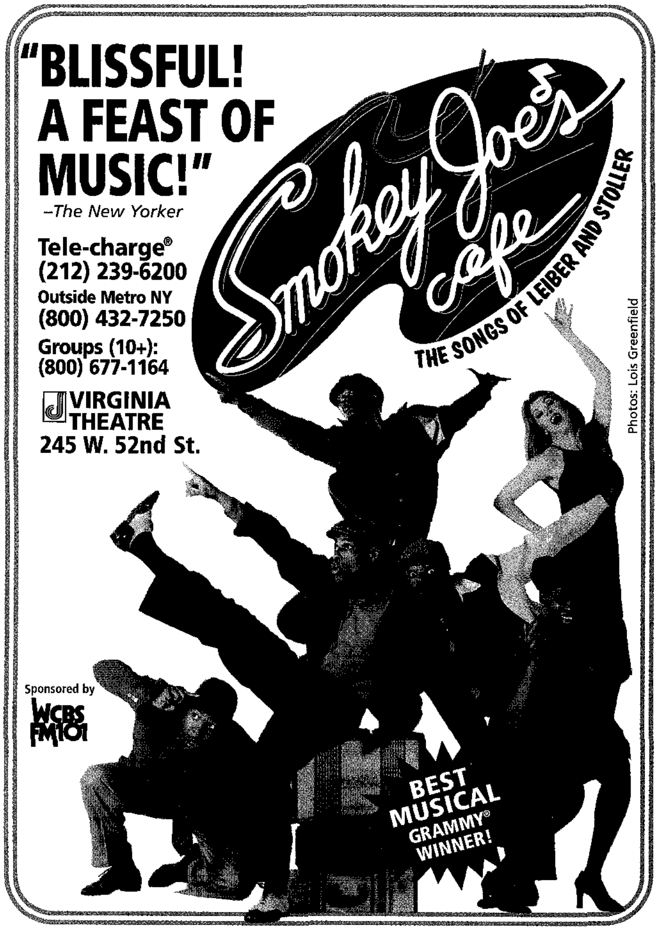

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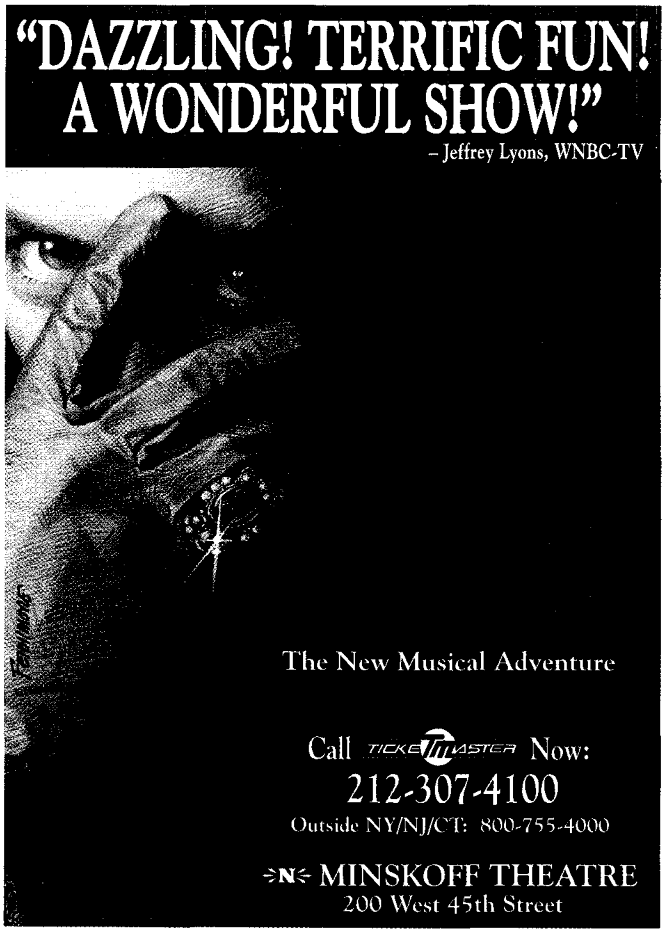

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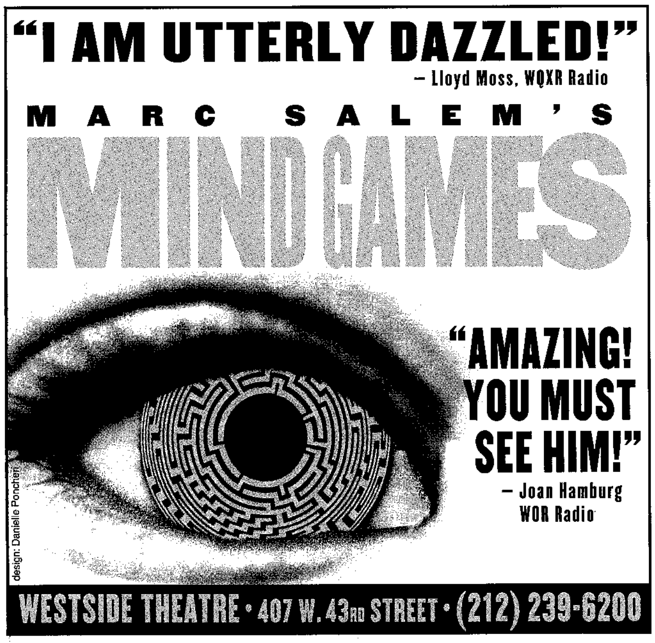

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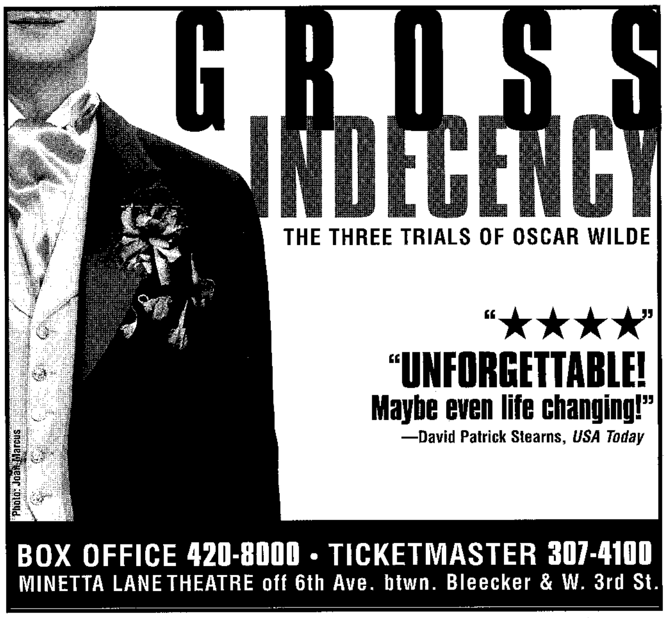

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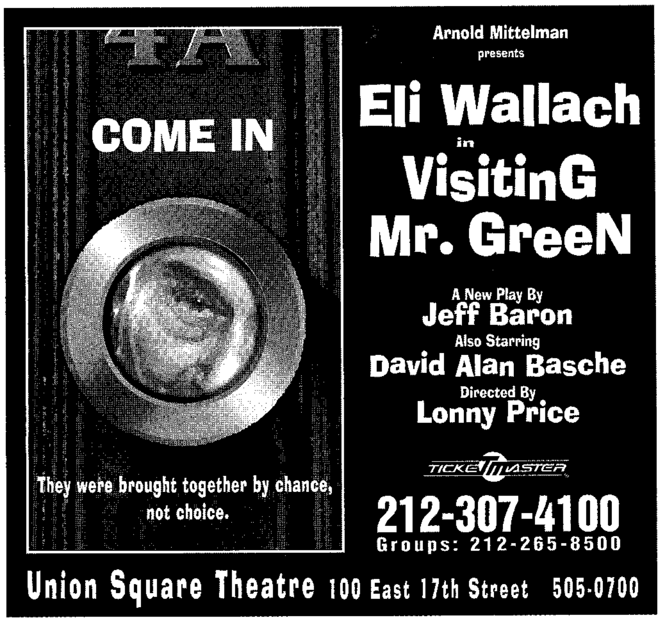

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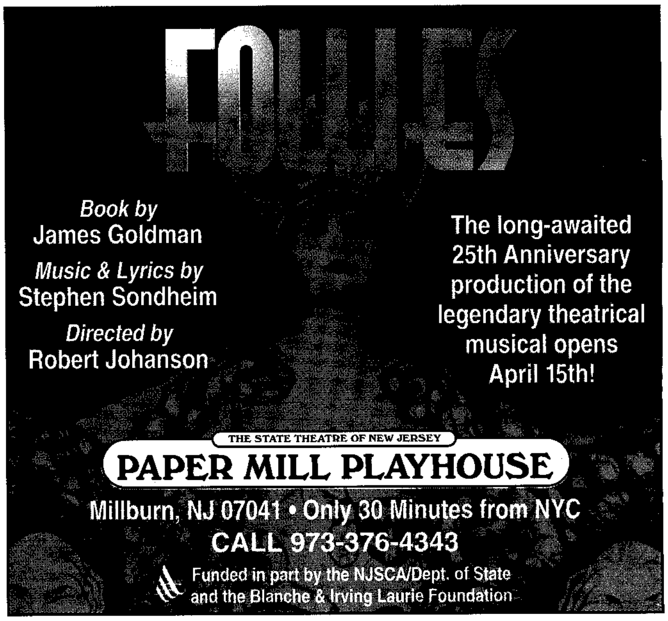

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Umberto D. (1952)—Vittorio De Sica's Umberto D. (played by Carlo Battisti, a retired professor) is a stubborn old gentleman with bourgeois standards and no means, isolated in an impersonal modern city, unable to communicate with anyone except his dog. Umberto's alienation has pride and spirit in it, even though his skinny frame is stiffening. There are graceful, beautiful episodes—such as a sequence of a young servant girl rising—that would be unthinkable in a conventional movie, or even in a documentary of the time, since the sequence doesn't illustrate any social thesis but is there for itself, for what Cesare Zavattini, who wrote the script with De Sica, called "the love of reality." There isn't a minute of banality in this simple, direct film, and there's none of the usual Italian post-synching—even the background sound is live and was recorded at the time. In Italian.—*P.K.* (Museum of Modern Art; Dec. 19 and Dec. 27.)

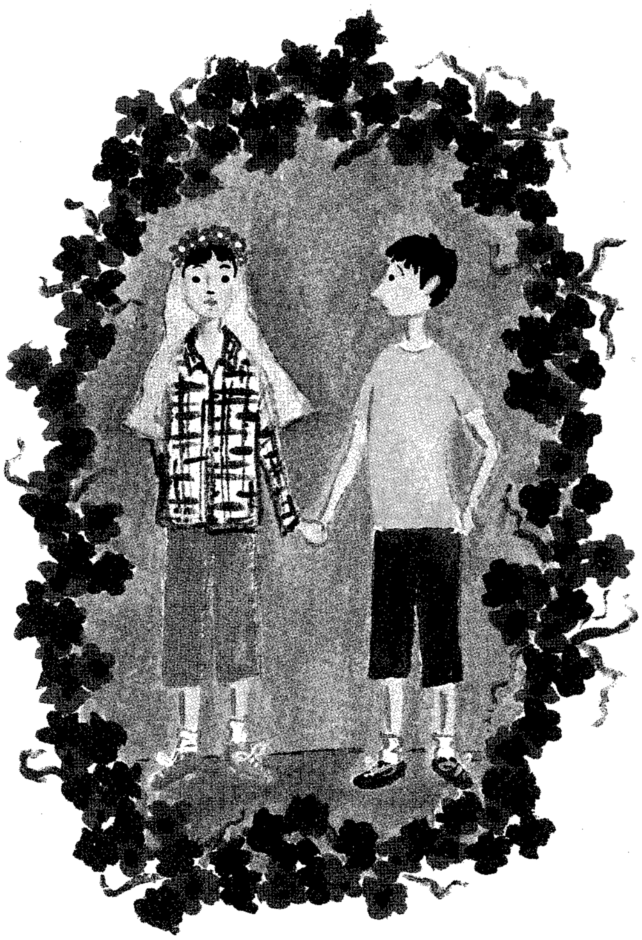
Welcome to Sarajevo—Michael Winterbottom's fine and splenetic movie stars Stephen Dillane as a British TV correspondent who finds himself becoming involved with a young Bosnian orphan (Emira Nusevic). The combination of Dillane's studious calm and Winterbottom's nervous anger propels the picture way beyond heartwarming. With Woody Harrelson as a hot-blooded American journalist, Marisa Tomei as an aid worker, and the excellent Goran Visnjic as the hero's driver.—*A.L.* (12/1/97) (Angelika Film Center.)

Will It Snow for Christmas?—Forget the sappy title: Sandrine Veysset's amazingly confident first film is an unflinching look at life on a poor French farm. Dominique Reymond plays the stoic mother of seven illegitimate children; Daniel Duval is the selfish father, who has an official family in town and treats this other one like a group of serfs. The picture is watchful and patient, with long takes of the kids in puddles or picking, washing, and boxing vegetables. Veysset didn't invent this kind of serene French naturalism, but she handles it beautifully, and it's good to see that the style has retained its strength. In French.—*S.K.* (Film Forum; Dec. 17-30.)

The Wings of the Dove—The director Iain Softley's adaptation of Henry James's magisterial late novel starts out as a jazzy, confident effort. But it gets a bit sluggish with the entrance of Milly Theale (Alison Elliott), the rich, good-hearted American orphan whom the penniless Kate Croy (Helena Bonham Carter) persuades her lover, Merton Densher (Linus Roache), to seduce in order to secure their future together. Elliott doesn't have the depth to convey Milly's galvanizing goodness, and this deficiency threatens to undo the film, despite its glorious costumes and all that golden Venice light.—*D.M.* (11/10/97) (Angelika Film Center, Beekman, Chelsea Cinemas, and Lincoln Square.)

ALSO PLAYING

AIR FORCE ONE (reviewed in our issue of 7/28/97): Worldwide Cinemas. . . . **BEAN** (11/24/97): Criterion Center . . . . **BENT:** Angelika Film Center. . . . **HAPPY TOGETHER:** Quad Cinema. . . . **HUGO POOL:** Gotham Cinema and Quad Cinema. . . . **I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER:** Criterion Center. . . . **L.A. CONFIDENTIAL** (9/22/97): Lincoln Square, New York Twin, and Village Theatre VII. . . . **A LIFE LESS ORDINARY** (11/3/97): Worldwide Cinemas. . . . **THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO LITTLE:** 64th and 2nd. . . . **MEN IN BLACK** (7/7/97): Worldwide Cinemas. . . . **MRS. BROWN** (8/4/97): 86th Street East Twin. . . . **MORTAL KOMBAT: ANNIHILATION:** Criterion Center, 86th Street East Twin, and Village East Cinemas. . . . **ONE NIGHT STAND:** Criterion Center. . . . **OTHER VOICES, OTHER ROOMS:** Village East Cinemas. . . . **THE PEACEMAKER** (10/6/97): Worldwide Cinemas. . . . **SHALL WE DANCE?:** 62nd and Broadway. . . . **SOUL FOOD:** Worldwide Cinemas. . . . **STARSHIP TROOPERS:** Criterion Center. . . . **SWITCHBACK:** Worldwide Cinemas. . . . **THE TANGO LESSON:** Regency and Village East Cinemas. . . . **TWISTED:** Quad Cinema.



Opening Dec. 26, Georges du Fresne and Julien Riviere in "Ma Vie en Rose."

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(Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.)

Film Forum 2, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—Through Dec. 25: "The Mother and the Whore" (1973, Jean Eustache; in French). . . . Dec. 26-30: "City Lights" (1931, Charlie Chaplin) and "Modern Times" (†).

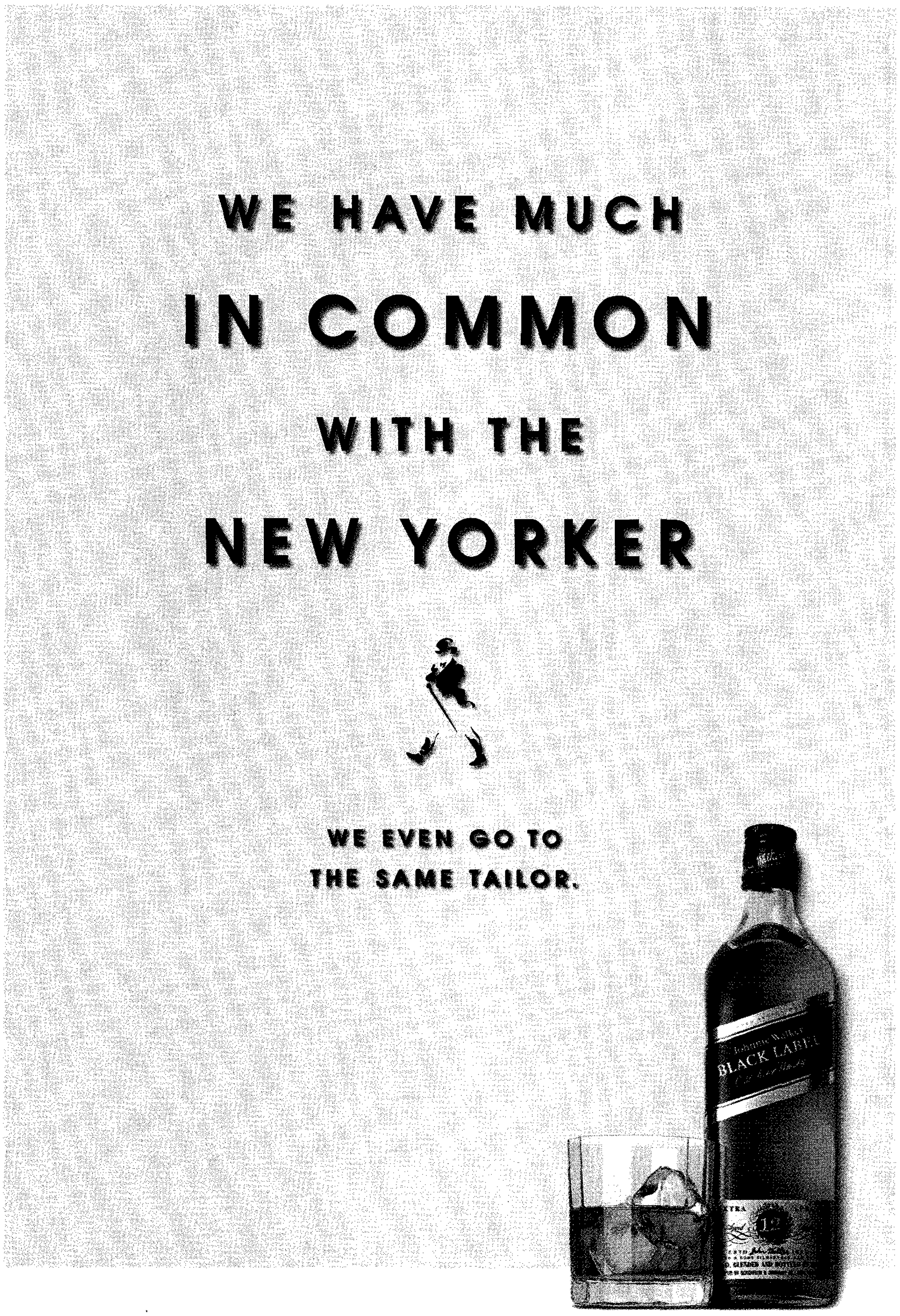
Museum of Modern Art, Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—Through Dec. 22: A program of recent films from the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltics. . . . ¶ Dec. 18 at 6:30 and Dec. 19 at 3: "Merry Christmas Baby! Holiday Ditty New York City" (1995, Gary Keys). . . . ¶ A program of Italian films; in Italian, with English subtitles. Dec. 19 at 6 and Dec. 27 at 5: "Umberto D." (†). . . . Dec. 20 at 2:30 and Dec. 23 at 6: "Love in the City" (1953, Dino Risi, Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Francesco Maselli, and Cesare Zavattini). . . . Dec. 20 at 5 and Dec. 26 at 3: "I'll Always Love You" (1933, Mario Camerini). . . . Dec. 21 at 2:30 and Dec. 29 at 3: "Vanina Vanini" (1961, Roberto Rossellini). . . . Dec. 26 at 6:30 and Dec. 28 at 1: "Once Upon a Time in the West" (1968, Sergio Leone). . . . Dec. 27 at 2:30 and Dec. 30 at 6: "Friends for Life" (1955, Franco Rossi). . . . Dec. 29 at 6 and Dec. 30 at 3: "Il Grido" (1957, Antonioni). . . . ¶ Dec. 19 at 8: A program of animated short films by Faith and Emily Hubley. . . . ¶ A series of films starring Ingrid Bergman. Dec. 19 at 8:15 and Dec. 27 at 2: "Notorious" (†). . . . Dec. 22 at 6 and Dec. 28 at 5: "Stromboli" (1950, Rossellini). . . . Dec. 23 at 2:30 and Dec. 29 at 6: "A Woman's Face" (1938, Gustav Molander; in Swedish). . . . Dec. 23 at 6: "Intermezzo: A Love Story" (1939, Gregory Ratoff). . . . Dec. 26 at 2:30: "The Bells of St. Mary's" (1954, Leo McCarey). . . . Dec. 26 at 6 and Dec. 27 at 5: "Spellbound" (1945, Alfred Hitchcock). . . . Dec. 26 at 8:15 and Dec. 30 at 6: "Under Capricorn" (1949, Hitchcock). . . . Dec. 28 at 2 and Dec. 30 at 2:30: "Casablanca" (1942, Michael Curtiz). . . . Dec. 29 at 2:30: "Elena and Her Men" (1957, Jean Renoir; in French).

Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (875-5600)—A program of new films from Spain; in Spanish, with English subtitles. Dec. 17 at 2 and 6:15: "Comanche Territory" (Gerardo Herrero). . . . Dec. 17 at 4 and Dec. 18 at 6:30: "Chevrolet" (Javier Maqua). . . . Dec. 18 at 2 and 9 and Dec. 19 at 4 and 8:15: "The Dog in the Manger" (Pilar Miró). . . . Dec. 18 at 4:15 and Dec. 19 at 2 and 6:15: "Wound of Light" (José Luis Garci). . . . Dec. 20 at 4 and Dec. 24 at 4:15 and 8:15: "The Stowaway" (Agusti Villaronga). . . . Dec. 20 at 6, Dec. 21 at 6:15, and Dec. 22 at 4:15 and 8:15: "Backroads" (Emilio Martinez-Lazaro) . . . . Dec. 20-21 at 8:15 and Dec. 24 at 2 and 6:15: "Midnight Bride" (Antonio Simón). . . . Dec. 21 at 4 and Dec. 22 at 2 and 6:15: "Shadows and Lights: 100 Years of Spanish Cinema" (Antonio Gimenez-Rico). . . . ¶ Dec. 17 at 8: "Pants on Fire" (1997, Rocky Collins). . . . ¶ Dec. 20-21 at 2: Five short films starring W. C. Fields. . . . ¶ A program of films by French directors; in French, with English subtitles. Dec. 26 at 2 and 6:15 and Dec. 27 at 4 and 8:15: "Overseas" (1992, Brigitte Rouän). . . . Dec. 26 at 4 and 8:15 and Dec. 27 at 6: "Chocolat" (1988 Claire Denis). . . . Dec. 28 at 4 and 7:45 and Dec. 29 at 2 and 6: "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" (1959, Alain Resnais). . . . Dec. 28 at 5:45 and 9:30 and Dec. 29 at 4 and 7:45: "Sunless" (1982, Chris Marker). . . . Dec. 30 at 2, 6, and 9:30: "Pépé le Moko" (1936, Julien Duvivier). . . . Dec. 30 at 4 and 7:45: "The Walls of Malapaga" (1949, René Clément). . . . ¶ Dec. 28 at 2: "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" (1971, Mel Stuart).

Whitney Museum, Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-0537)—Dec. 17 at 12:30: "Midnight Lace" (1960, David Miller). . . . Dec. 17 at 3: "The Wheeler Dealers" (1963, Arthur Hiller). . . . Dec. 18 at 2:30 and Dec. 19-20 at 3:30: "The Pink Panther" (†). . . . Dec. 18 at 6 and Dec. 19-20 at 12:30: "Who Are You, Polly Magoo?" (1966, William Klein). . . . Dec. 21 and Dec. 24 at 11:30: "Annie Hall" (1977, Woody Allen). . . . Dec. 21 and Dec. 24 at 1:30: "Model" (1977, Frederick Wiseman). . . . Dec. 26-28 at 11:30: "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever" (1970, Vincente Minnelli). . . . Dec. 26-28 at 2: "Cleopatra Jones" (1973, Jack Starrett). . . . Dec. 26-28 at 4: "Mahogany" (1975; Berry Gordy).

A Different Light Bookstore, 151 W. 19th St.—A Sunday-night series of free films (and popcorn). On Dec. 21 at 7, the feature will be "Cabin in the Sky" (†); on Dec. 28 at 7, "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever" (1970, Vincente Minnelli).

Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3363)—Through Dec. 18: A program of eight new films from Holland. . . . From Dec. 19: A program of ten kung-fu films from Hong Kong; in Cantonese, with English subtitles.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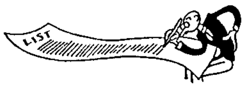
THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

E-MAIL FROM SILICON VALLEY

A lawyer who thrives on making mischief for Bill Gates.

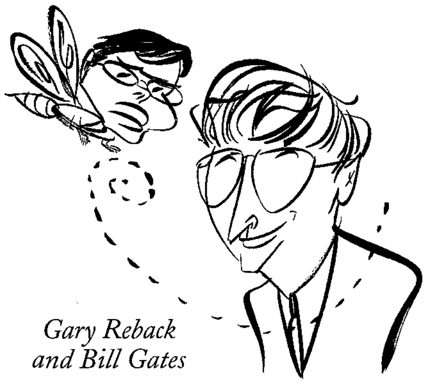


THE Justice Department's trust busters were celebrating after last week's preliminary ruling against Microsoft, but they weren't the only ones. Gary Reback, a member of the Palo Alto law firm Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, is a man who gets paid to complain about Bill Gates—the rough Silicon Valley equivalent of drawing a salary for breathing. For several years, Reback, an antitrust specialist, has represented a collection of high-tech companies in their efforts to persuade the federal government to take action against Microsoft. In waging this campaign, he has been called a crusader, a grandstander, an intellectual, a zealot, a quote machine, and, on a recent cover of *Wired*, "Bill Gates's Worst Nightmare."

Judging Reback's true nightmarishness has always been a little tricky, since his clients prefer to remain anonymous (the fact that the two most prominent are Netscape and Sun Microsystems is an open secret) and he declines to talk specifically about the lobbying he is doing. Not long ago, however, senior executives at two of Reback's client firms told me that in the past year and a half the lawyer had sent to the Justice Department four confidential white papers that laid out a sweeping antitrust case against Microsoft. The petition that the department filed, in October, was, by comparison, quite modest; yet the arguments that it put forward strongly echoed those made by Reback.

When I asked Reback recently about the white papers, he expressed surprise that I knew about them, and then refused to confirm their existence; indeed, in later conversations, he referred to the volumes of documents as "the hypothetical white papers." In them, Reback and his co-author, Susan Creighton, also of Wilson Sonsini, advance what they call a "monopoly maintenance" theory: that Microsoft, in order to preserve its monopoly over P.C. operating systems with Windows, engages in an array of predatory and exclusionary business practices. (Microsoft denies all antitrust claims.)

Reback has been down this road before. Three years ago, when Microsoft announced its intention to take over the personal-finance-software maker Intuit, for one and a half billion dollars, the Justice Department asked Reback to draft a white paper laying out objections to the merger, so that the government attorneys would have something to chew over. Reback was warned by a Justice Department economist that his avant-garde arguments might be rejected as "totally preposterous." Yet, in the end, the antitrust division moved to block the merger, and, rather than wage a costly fight, Microsoft abandoned the idea.


Gary Reback and Bill Gates

Helping to stop the Intuit deal was a high point for Reback, and now things seem to be going his way again. Reback is a forty-eight-year-old Tennessean with a lean frame and hair that is starting the shift from pepper to salt, and his demeanor when he is talking about Microsoft—which is pretty much always—is fretfulness punctuated with blind outrage. His voice teeters on the edge of whine. Still, he is clearly having a ball. Reback was the first speaker at last month's Ralph Nader anti-Microsoft event in Washington, and he demonstrated how, after Microsoft bought the Funk & Wagnalls encyclopedia and turned it into the P.C. product Encarta in 1993, the entry on Bill Gates changed. The original version read, "Although Gates has accumulated great wealth from his holdings of Microsoft stock, he has been known as a tough competitor who seems to value winning in a competitive environment over money." In this year's version, the last half of the sentence says that Gates is "known for his personal and corporate contributions to charity and educational organizations."

If the Justice Department is relying on Reback's white papers, the current case may be, as he puts it, "a wonderful start, but only the first shoe to drop." He told me, "The only thing the robber barons did that Bill Gates hasn't done is use dynamite against their competitors."

Reback insists that he has nothing against Gates personally. When I asked him what question he would put to Gates if he had the chance, Reback replied, "Why do I want to ask him a question? I already know what he's thinking. I mean, I've been writing books on him."

—JOHN HEILEMANN

PECKING ORDER

Los Angeles partygoers play "Who's on first?" with the Getty.

IN Los Angeles, the drive to acquire social status is coupled with the equally relentless political imperative to be inclusive, nondiscriminatory. (This is the cultural environment

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

that produces, say, "Amistad," a movie designed to promote the idea of equality *and* to pulverize the competition when Oscar calls.) Attempting to reconcile these simultaneous impulses toward élitism and egalitarianism can cause all kinds of social anxiety. This was demonstrated last week, when the new Getty Center celebrated its opening by throwing black-tie parties on four consecutive nights. Officially, no single bash was to be thought of as *the* Getty party. Unofficially, partygoers looked for the secret logic behind the guest roster (was it alphabetical? Zip Code-related?), and worried that they were on the B, C, or D list.

"I have some friends who want to know every person on the guest list so that they can torment themselves as to whether or not they are at the right thing," the art dealer Larry Gagosian said before the festivities began.

"I am going on the Thursday, the grand finale," J. Carter Brown, the former director of the National Gallery of Art, told me. Did he buy the museum's line that all the parties were equal? "Ah," he said. "Some animals are more equal than others."

Some suspected that Tuesday was the cool night, particularly those invited for Tuesday. "I am told it is Richard Meier's night," said Gagosian, a Tuesday guest. Meier—the Getty's architect—confirmed that most of his allotment of guests did seem to have been invited for Tuesday, but he thought that to call it "his" night was overestimating his clout. "I was originally allowed to invite three hundred couples, and then it was three hundred people, and then I don't know what it was," he said. "Unfortunately, I think I told a lot of people who then didn't get invited. They all blame me."

The Getty's big-tent ethic put off some invitees who didn't want to run the risk of being rabble. "There are chic people who say they can't be bothered to go," explained the art historian David Freedberg. (Freedberg was invited for Wednesday, but he declined.) Then, there was the sense that, as with the Oscars, the best parties were the private ones: the art patron Eli Broad's dinner for a hundred and fifty on Friday, or the party that the collectors Lisette and Norman Ackerberg were giving on Sunday night in their Meier-designed Malibu home.

When pressed, the Getty finally explained that though each night was equally important, there were definite flavors: Monday was for local cultural types, like the photography collector and former rock star Graham Nash; Tuesday for arts and business leaders, from Frank Stella to Jeffrey Katzenberg; Wednesday for museum directors from all over the world; and Thursday for indeterminate worthies, such as Tom Brokaw, Mayor Richard Riordan, Warren Christopher, and Frank Gehry.

"People say it's the night that the movers and shakers are going," a mischievous-sounding Gehry said when he was asked about his Thursday invitation. "I was told, of course, that every night is the most important one," Gehry, who had to miss the event because of a prior engagement, added. "But I was told that this was *the* most important one."

—REBECCA MEAD

CHRISTMAS PAST

Remembering a peculiar holiday dinner of stray souls.

IN 1953, after I had completed my stint in the United States Army, I returned to New York and found a furnished room for myself for twelve dollars a week right above the subway station at 181st Street and Fort Washington Avenue. The landlady, Agnes Klein, told me straightaway that although she was a Klein, she wasn't Jewish—her maiden name was Canty—and that if I had no place to go on Christmas Day I could join her and her son. Her husband, Eddie, she said, was the Jewish one and the cause of all her troubles. Just before the war, he ran off to Germany with their ten-year-old son, Michael, because his mother was dying and he expected to inherit her fortune. Of course, both were rounded up eventually and ended up in a camp. The husband was never seen again, but Michael survived and, at the end of the war, was able to tell the Americans who he was. What was left of him was kept in the little room behind Mrs. Klein's.

Mrs. Klein said that I should come to the kitchen at about two in the afternoon. We could then have a drink before the dinner. There wouldn't be turkey. Would I mind if she cooked European?

On Christmas Day, strange smells floated from the kitchen, where I found Mrs. Klein pushing things around in a frying pan. "Pierogis," she said. "Polish. Michael loves them. Have a vodka with a little orange juice. Good for you this time of year, with the flu coming."

We sat in her living room with our drinks, and she talked about her husband.

When she leaned over to adjust a light, her wig fell off, and I had had enough vodka that I couldn't stop myself from laughing out loud at the sight of her skull with its little tufts of brown hair. "Go ahead," she said. "Someday your mother's wig will fall off and we'll see if you laugh then." And she clapped the wig back on her head.

I told her my mother had a fine head of hair, and she said, "No wonder. Your mother never had a lunatic husband. If it wasn't for him, Michael would be out of that bed in there, having a vodka and waiting for his pierogis. Oh, my God, the pierogis!"

She jumped up from her chair and ran to the kitchen. "Well, they're a little bit burned, but that makes them nice and crisp. We might as well have another vodka while I cook the sauerkraut and kielbasa."

She poured the drinks and barked at me when I asked her what a kielbasa was. "I can't believe the ignorance in this world. Two years in the U.S. Army and you don't know from kielbasa? It's Polish, for Christ's sake, sausage, and you should watch me fry it in case you marry someone who's not Irish and is demanding her kielbasa."

We stayed in the kitchen and drank some more, while the kielbasa sizzled

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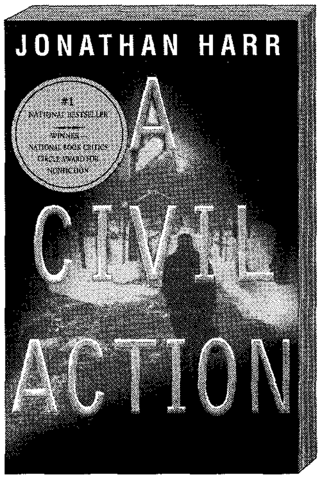
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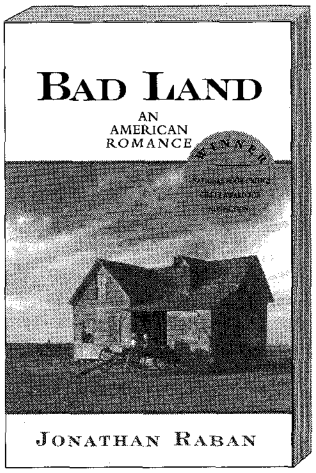
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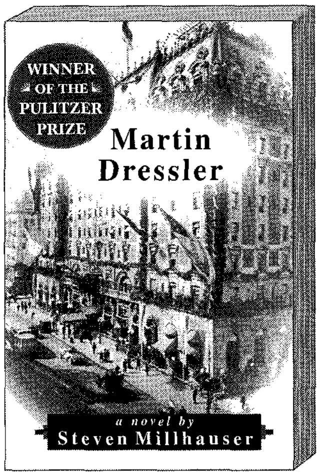
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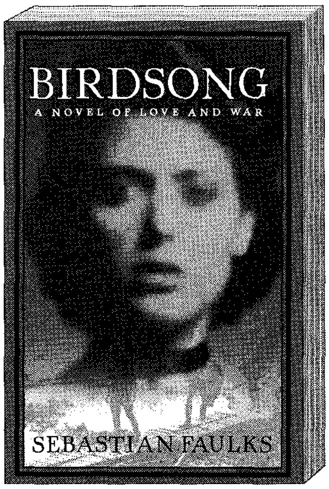
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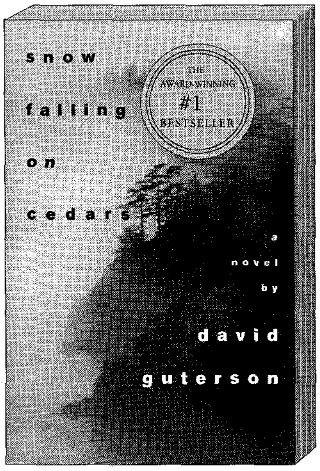
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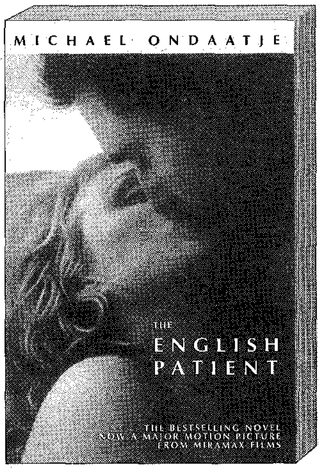
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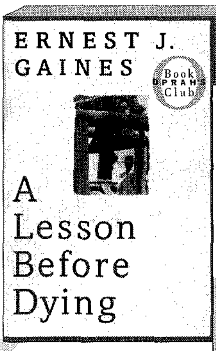
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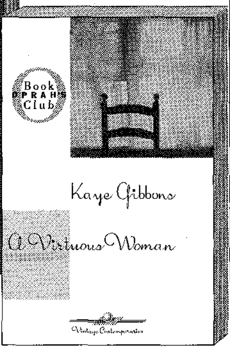
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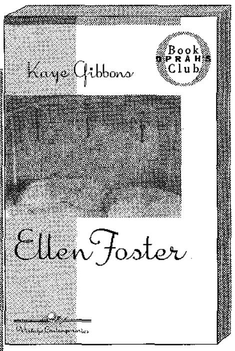
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and the sauerkraut stewed, smelling sharply of vinegar. She put three plates on a tray, and poured a glass of Manischewitz for Michael. "He loves it," she said. "Loves the Manischewitz with the pierogis and the kielbasa."

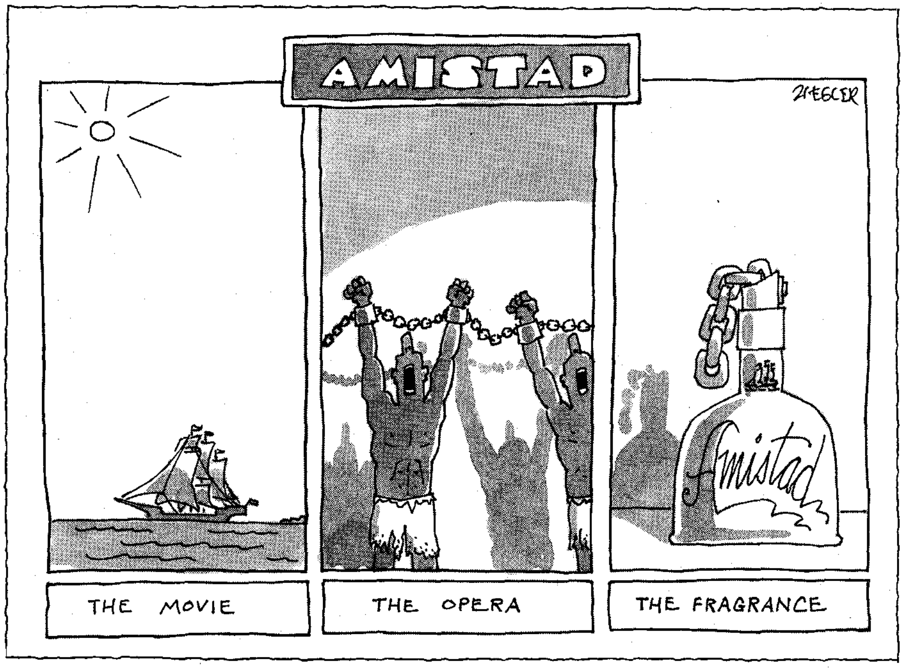
We made our way through her bedroom and into a small, dark room, where Michael, what was left of him, sat up in bed, staring ahead. We brought in chairs and used his bed as a table. Mrs. Klein turned on the radio and we listened to oompah-oompah accordion music. "That's his favorite music—anything European," she said. "He gets nostalgic, you know. Don't you, Michael? Don't you? I'm talking to you. Merry Christmas, Michael. Merry goddam Christmas." She tore off her wig and threw it into a corner. "No more pretending, Michael. I've had it. Talk to me or next year I cook American. Next year, the stuffing, yams, the works, Michael."

He stared straight ahead, and the kielbasa grease glistened around his plate. His mother fiddled with the radio until she found Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas."

"Better get used to it, Michael. Next year, Bing and the stuffing. To hell with kielbasa."

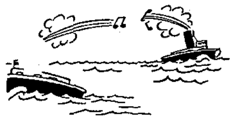
She pushed her plate aside on the bed and fell asleep with her head by Michael's elbow. I waited awhile and then took my dinner to the kitchen, dumped it into the garbage, went back to my room, and fell into my own bed.

—FRANK MCCOURT



THE PICTURES

Director James Cameron can't seem to keep out of the deep end.



WHEN James Cameron was eleven years old, he built a little submarine and sent it to the bottom of the Niagara River manned by a mouse. Now, three decades later, Cameron gets to be the mouse. But this time he has gone two and a half miles under the sea, to shoot footage of the wrecked Titanic, which provides the haunting emotional center of his epic film about the ship. And this time he had lots of help. To accompany him on the deep dive, into freezing waters northeast of Nova Scotia, Cameron called on Al Giddings, an underwater cinematographer who is accustomed to working with big fish on natural-history programs.

To make the deep dive, the filmmakers used the world's only pair of submersibles able to withstand the pressure so far below the ocean's surface. These MIR subs, which came on loan, with their co-pilots, from the Russian Academy of Science, were originally used, during the Cold War, to monitor intercontinental communications links.

Because the glass in the subs' portholes was too thick to film through with a wide-angle lens, Cameron recruited his brother Mike, an aerospace engineer (and a collaborator on the submersible-mouse project), to build complex remote-control cameras that wouldn't be crushed by the mammoth pressure. The camera was by itself in the cold and the dark for sixteen hours a day, operated by Giddings and the director, each wedged inside one of the tiny submarines. "The glass in the cameras had to withstand over a million pounds of force," Mike Cameron said. "Think of fourteen fully loaded cement trucks stacked end to end, sitting on this piece of glass." James Cameron and Giddings spent more than two hundred hours on the great ship's decks. "We would float down, then drop for three hours, free fall, just to reach the bottom," Giddings said.

Obviously, at twelve thousand six hundred and forty feet down, there would be no reshoots. "About as many people have walked on the moon as have gone to the Titanic on a submersible," Mike Cameron says. "There's no light there—it's blacker than space." He said that he'd rather have sent his brother to Mars than to the Titanic. "The breathing apparatus they had is almost identical to what is used in space. There's a fire risk. There's a contamination risk. If a piece of wiring burns, the toxic gases from the wiring can get you."

The trickiest part of the deep dive was filming the rooms inside the wreck, so that they could be reconstructed inside a tank in Mexico. "We would park on the open upper deck of the ship, then launch the remotely operated vehicle—a sort of flying video camera," Giddings said. "We'd watch on a monitor. Eventually, the ROV would hover down the grand staircase, then into the first-class cabins." The corpses are long gone from the Titanic's ruined staterooms, but, Mike Cameron explained, because of the tannic acid in seawater, leather is perfectly preserved. "You'll find a pair of shoes neatly laid out there, marking the place where a body was."

With "Titanic" behind him, Al Giddings is back on the shark-and-whale circuit. "Nothing I've done is as provocative as working with humpbacks. You know you're being pondered by some wonderful brain," he says. "Hollywood is totally different. It's like going to war."

—VALERIE FELDNER

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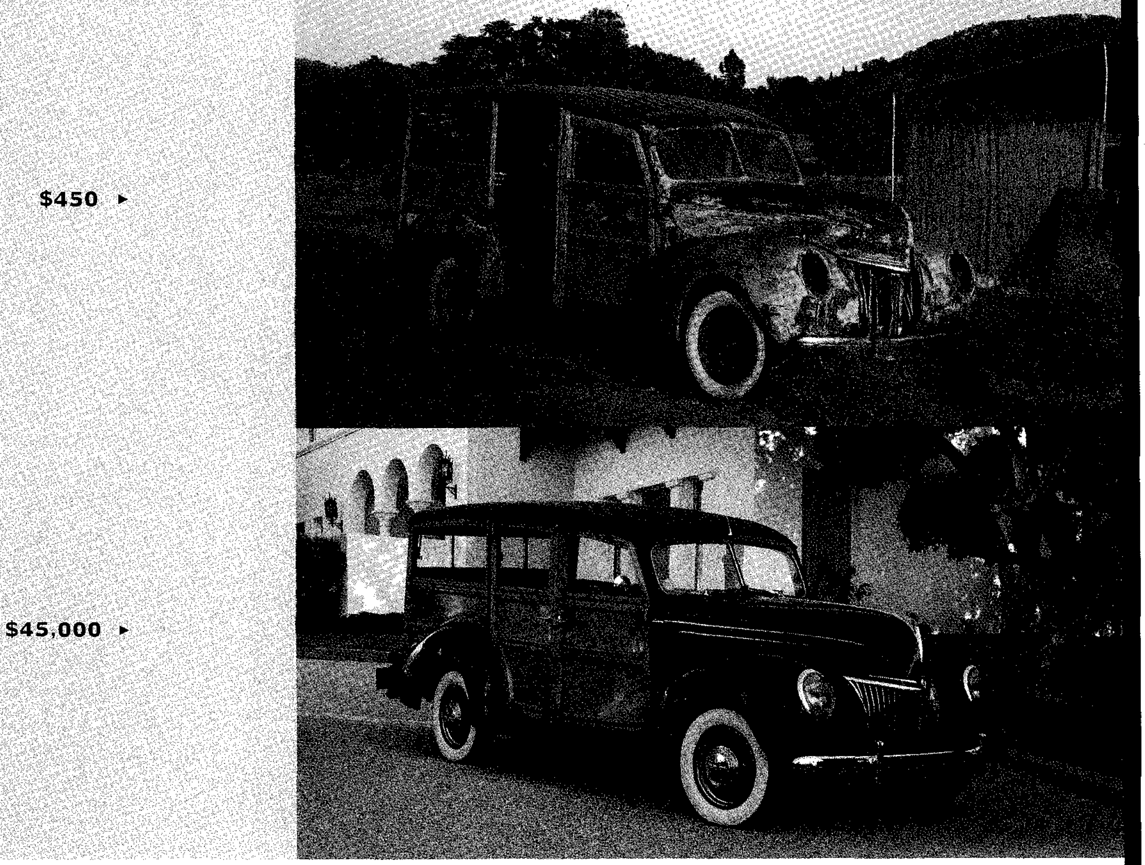
If you have the vision to see it.



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LIFE AND LETTERS

A LEGEND IN HIS OWN MIND

James Thackara has spent twenty-five years writing a novel that some have called this century's "War and Peace." Why won't anyone publish it?

BY JOHN WALSH

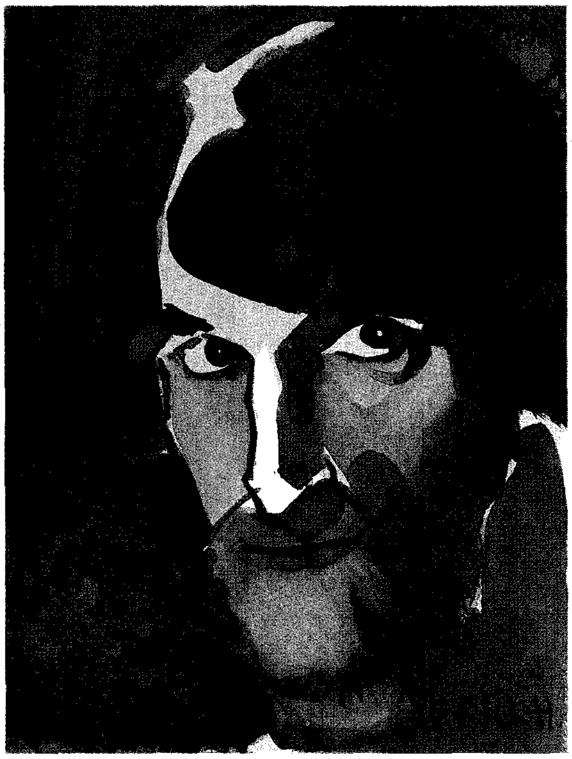
"WHEN a true genius appears in the world," Jonathan Swift wrote, "you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." But how else do you recognize genius? If a new Leonardo, a new Melville, a new Ibsen, or Picasso, or Rabelais were to appear in our midst, would we recognize him for what he was, or would we, dunces all, write him off as an eccentric, a fake, a schizoid dreamer?

For literary agents and publishers, whose livelihood depends on their ability to identify new writers of promise, nothing is more mortifying than to feel that the next James Joyce has slipped by because his work seemed too difficult, too strange, or too "uncommercial"—nothing, that is, except an uncomfortable suspicion that the newest "genius" may turn out to be a fraud.

Many people have looked at the American novelist James Thackara in the last ten years and wondered, Is he the real thing?

IF James Thackara is a genius, he's certainly not a conspicuously rich, successful, or public genius. At fifty-three, after a writing career of almost thirty years, his earnings from his writing remain stubbornly in five figures. Although his first two published novels, "America's Children" and "Ahab's Daughter," were brought out by premier-league London publishing houses (he is unpublished in America), he remains virtually unknown to the reading public. Though he has a network of high-profile admirers and friends (the novelist and cultural theorist Marina Warner once told Thackara, "You remind me of Stendhal"), he never attends literary gatherings. He has never had a salaried job. He is teased by friends about his unfamiliarity with the modern world, his bafflement at manifestations of popular culture.

Thackara lives in a Victorian house in Camden Town, in north London. Japanese art works line its walls. Hamsters peep and hide in a cage in its upstairs bathroom. He is a strikingly handsome man—tall and gangling, with penetrating gray eyes. And it strikes you, too, that, whether by accident or design, he resembles Jesus Christ. He has the perfect manners of a Chinese mandarin, as he makes us tea in a mustard-hued basement kitchen, designed by his wife, Davina, who is a clever, anxious-looking British art historian.



Thackara: It's hard to tell whether his book is the work of a visionary genius or an over-educated fraud.

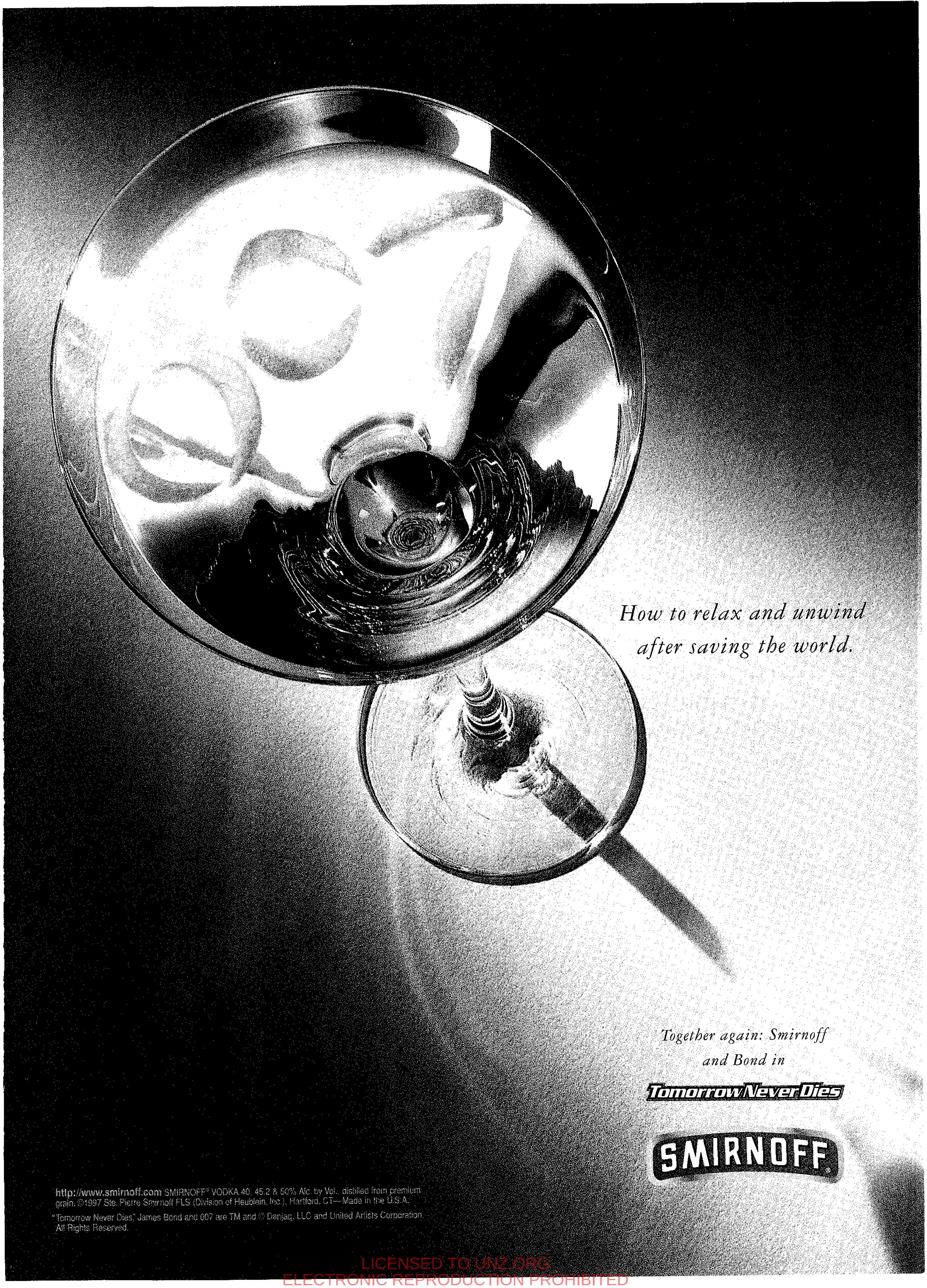
EDUARD ERLIKH

Thackara works in a small bedroom on the second floor. In a corner of the room, there's a low-slung, silk-upholstered, Italian-made imitation-Chinese colonial wicker chair, extravagantly cushioned and as noble as a throne. Here Thackara has sat for years, eight or ten hours a day, writing in longhand and placing the finished sheets on a low wooden table. The setting is cramped and claustrophobic—a place of focus and concentration, intense thought and restless intellectual connection-making.

Thackara talks in a crazed, spilling, omni-cultural, polymathic flood of ideas, allusions, quotations, titles, breezy historical loops, and airily summarized philosophical cruxes—in such a way that the cowed and humbled listener can do little more than grab a corner and hang on. It's said that one night in the early nineteen-seventies, when Thackara was courting Lizzie Spender, the daughter of the English poet Sir Stephen Spender, James and Lizzie shared a car journey home with the venerable Sir Stephen, who was obliged to abandon the car at a convenient traffic light and flee into the darkness to escape the flow of eloquence from the back seat. Thackara doesn't recall the incident, but he laughs easily, and he is presumably aware of the effect that his displays of learning have on his interlocutors.

And he clearly believes in himself, possessing a quiet confidence in the restorative judgments of posterity. "I work on the basis that there is no reason on earth, despite fads and retreatism, why one person shouldn't still be able to produce the Great Work," he told me. "Great in the sense that it makes no compromises with Truth, Honor, Beauty, Love—all the things that have been our spiritual tradition, the tradition of the soul. We're discussing modern publishing, but it could be that I am Homer. It could be that in a hundred years' time people will say, 'It fits into this tradition.' "

Thackara's own Great Work is a book that has gestated for twenty-five years through a jungle of rewrites and a Hundred Years' War of publishing battles. Called "The Book of Kings," it is an eleven-hundred-page novel set across the whole continent of Europe in the years shortly before and during the Second World War. Its author's plain ambition is to write the "War and Peace" of the late twentieth century, with a mythic, "Ulysses"-style underpinning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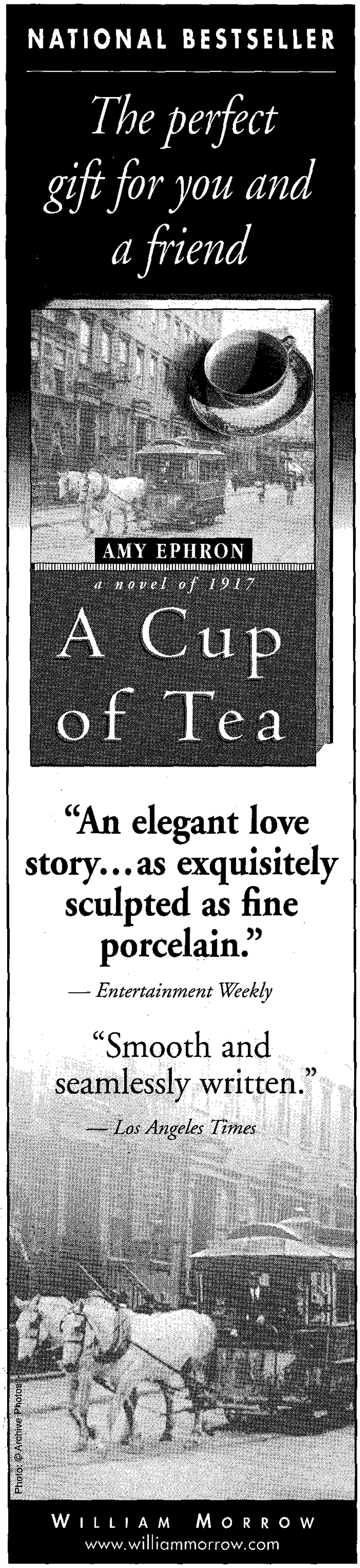

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from the Bible. Many people who have had access to its pages consider it a flawed masterpiece. Whatever it is, it has never been published. There are two reasons: first, its author has never been able to reach a workable compromise with the modern publishing world about the final form the book should take and, second, nobody in the modern publishing world can decide whether it is the work of a visionary genius or an overeducated, obsessive-neurotic phony.

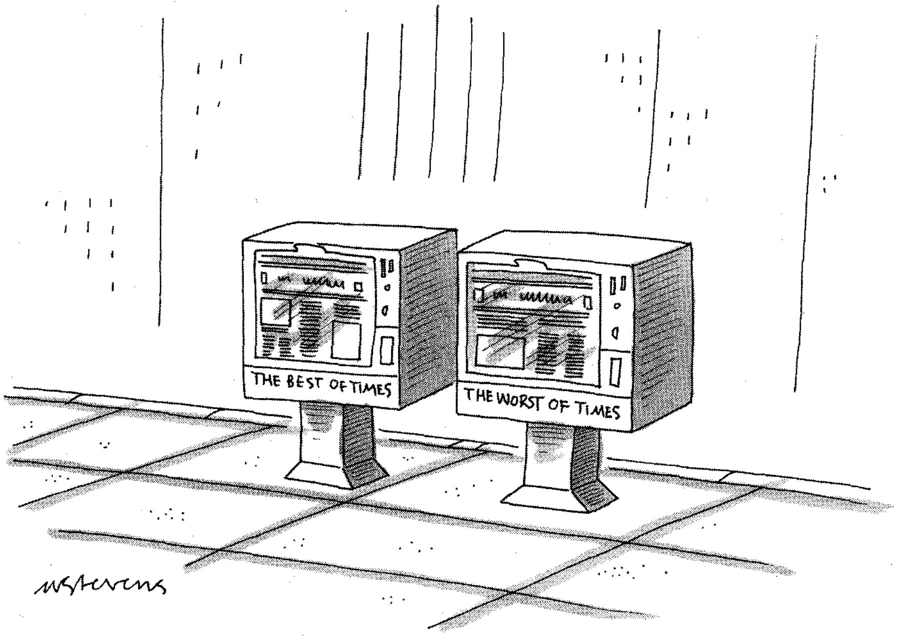
Thackara himself thinks that the publishers are scared of the work's power. "These people know that if the book is what they think it is—a book of such ambitions, that uses the machinery of understanding to the *n*th degree, to grasp and expand the levels to which we can understand where we are in the world, a book with that power in it—then all the fuses start blowing. They're scared for their reputations. If the thing doesn't work out, they'll be a laughingstock. If it does work out, it'll be mega-excitement for everyone. But the author becomes an endangered figure in the middle of it all."

And so Thackara waits, in the sombre gloom of his handsome house, for the world to catch up with him—to appreciate his masterpiece, acclaim his genius, publish his work, and put him in what he claims is his rightful place on the bookshelf—alongside Hemingway and Melville and Faulkner and Tolstoy. He affects not to care. But he does care.

THACKARA doesn't like talking about his family, but he is a busy mythologizer of his past. Every branch of his family tree seems alive with colorful scandals. His great-great-grandfather was General William Tecumseh Sherman. His mother's mother was a novice nun in South Carolina who ran off with a Swiss cotton merchant and went to live in Zurich, had two sons by him, then married his brother ("It's what runaway nuns generally do," Thackara says laconically), gave birth to two daughters, divorced the brother, and went to live in east Africa. Thackara's maternal grandfather was from a German-Swiss family, "some of them considerably wealthy people." But Thackara's mother, Ellen-Louise (known as Luigi), was born in Texas, "in a little hut with tarantulas running around"—according to Thackara, "they were so poor they had to count the peas for lunch"—and grew up in Shanghai, China's raffish commercial harbor, with her cotton-dealing father. Thackara's own father, James Thackara, Sr., became wealthy—a Chase Manhattan banker who dealt in Arab oil accounts for David Rockefeller. At the time he met Ellen-Louise, he was attached to the American Embassy in Rio, to which she came on vacation with her wayward father, with whom she lived "the life of a colonial princess," Thackara says. "My mother's highly intelligent, a Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in history, but she's also a person who gravitates naturally to golf clubs. A mixture of the very innocent, the very puritanical, and the very worldly."

They married in 1942, but the marriage was a disaster—the kind of convergence which is only improved by the arrival of war. The couple separated while Ellen-Louise was pregnant with young James. He was born in California, but during his formative years he was dragged from country to country, from school to school, by his peripatetic mother. It was an upsetting time. "I was an only child. I had no brothers and sisters, no family around me, and, moving from place to place, I had no friends. I had intense friendships that were taken away, and I blocked them. I never thought I would have a place in the world."

Thackara often emphasizes his statelessness, his suspicion of nationhood, his lack of a country to call his own. Constantly being on the move for the first eighteen years of his life made him a "globalist," he says. "There's usually a moment in people's lives when they look at the five billion people in the world—it's a mathematical thing, it goes on in the unconscious—and think, Where's my peer group? Where's my point of reference? Other people have some focus to their sense of belonging. I had none of that." Worse still, this nervous child encountered a succession of frights in a grim postwar landscape. At three, he crossed the equator in a cruise ship bound from New Orleans to Argentina, and witnessed the bacchanalia of the ship's King Neptune celebrations: they ended in a noisome slew of drunkenness, shaved heads, rotten eggs, and puked-up Scotch. ("I couldn't believe adults behaved like that," he recalls. "The chaos . . . ") At five, he gazed at Antibes, on the formerly idyllic Côte



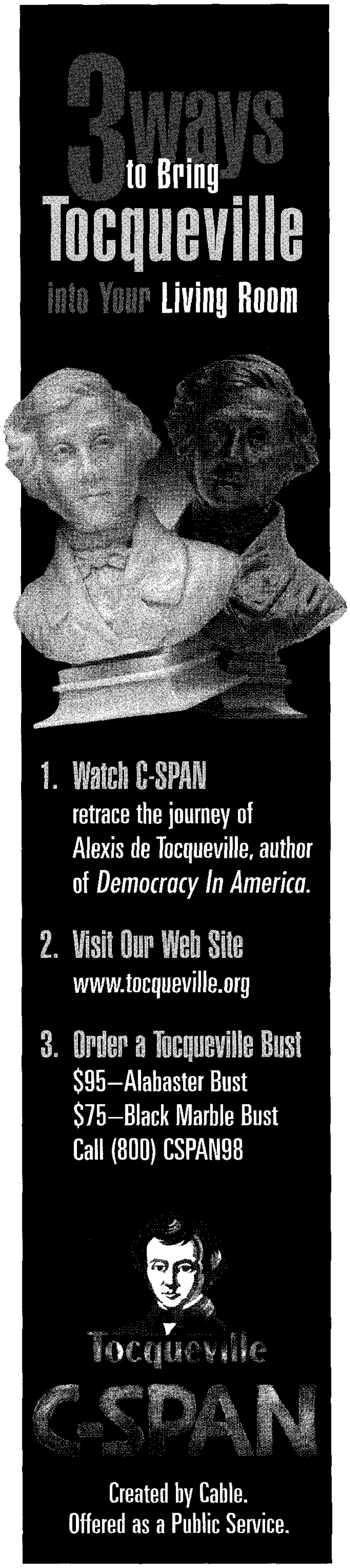
d'Azur, gnawingly conscious that some cataclysm had taken place. At eleven, he was in Italy, surveying the flak marks on the walls of Rome and feeling the Fascist scars that hadn't yet healed. All this was a vivid induction, for a California kid, into Europe's hungover postwar bereavement. It was too much to take in.

The answer lay in books. "Writers were my father and mother. Characters and plots—that stuff to me was all comprehensible and real. That was where I lived. It was telling me who I was meant to be and how I was to survive. All the people around me seemed treacherous and evil and totally selfish—all dedicated to feathering their nests and building awful, disgusting stuff that was ruining the world. So I became something quite outside my parents' cultural tradition. I became a refugee and a mystic, a seeker after love and a seeker after beauty." He read the works of Charles Dickens ("The blacking factory is something I can understand. I was never in a blacking factory, but I understand the level of sensibility") and was hugely affected by "Don Quixote," enjoyed Mark Twain, was comforted by A. A. Milne. He also studied the lives of favored writers, reading their biographies. "It was particularly important for me, because I had no character. I wasn't Italian or American—I was still assembling myself. The details of the writers' lives were important to me. I got to know everything about Tolstoy's temperament, and Dostoyevsky's. I was able to apportion those things in terms of different aspects of myself."

When Thackara arrived at Harvard, in 1963, it must have seemed to him that he had a home at last. "Bob Dylan came with a twelve-string guitar and played at our freshman mixer. Nobody'd heard of him. A year later, he was world famous, and I went to his birthday party, at Ondine's restaurant. Timothy Leary was giving LSD to students. One of my girlfriends—a Chinese girl, Lana—was one of the original patrons of Club 47. You'd go to this place and John Hammond was there, Arlo Guthrie was there, Dylan was there, Joan Baez. We were the sixties. The sixties fucking began in that first year at Harvard. I had a great time. I met a lot of people. I was part of the sexual revolution—sexual freedom was very important to me, and I debauched like crazy."

The shadow of Vietnam, however, was hovering over Harvard's fornicating freedom tasters. Thackara flunked the Army physical examination, but the existence of the war managed to traumatize him all the same, on a personal level. It denied the existentialist orphan a safe haven once again. "It just felt that everything life was supposedly built upon—education, knowledge, scholarship, books—was all being put on hold for the war. It was just happening to me all over again. It was like being born into a nonfamily once more."

It is characteristic of Thackara to have taken the Vietnam War as a per-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sonal slight—a disobliging frustration of his plans for self-awareness imposed by forces beyond his control. Against the concepts of nationhood and patriotism he advanced the forces of literature and enlightenment: "I knew then that I'd been brought into the world for one thing, and one thing alone—I'd felt this from the age of five—and that was devoting every single moment of my life to writing. I did not want to lose two years of my life in Vietnam. If I belong to any nation, it's the nation of writing. If writing had said to me, 'Go to Vietnam!'—if Cervantes had said that—I'd have gone with alacrity."

Thackara went to London instead. For his twenty-first birthday, his cotton-trade grandfather settled fifty thousand dollars on him, and he decided that that much could keep him going for years if he invested it and spent only two thousand pounds a year, living in a small apartment in Chelsea. "London seemed to me the greatest international city then," he says, "greater than Paris in the thirties or classical Rome—a true empire collapsing on itself, a great nation entering its most tragic phase. I felt I could identify with it. It was like me. Very international, very sad, and very alone."

Thackara embraced with zeal the life of the solitary, struggling artist which derives from the German Romantics—principally from his beloved Goethe's passionate outsider-hero, Young Werther. One can see how a Mittel-europa gloom might envelop Thackara's lonely soul. It's easy to imagine him born in another time, and swanning around a Viennese military academy, sword in hand, or posing—the magnificent solitary—against a Caspar David Friedrich landscape. "I knew what it was to be a writer," he says. "I had no illusions. The one thing I had to do was survive. I wasn't going to fall by the wayside. I wasn't going to be killed by the patronage system. I wasn't going to be screwed up by foundations and grants. I didn't know much about writing, but I was willing to learn."

In the spring of 1982, Thackara went looking for an agent. He was living in Notting Hill, a fashionable haut-bohemian district of west London, and one of his neighbors was Deborah Rogers, a leading literary agent; her clients include Kazuo Ishiguro ("The Remains of the Day") and Ian McEwan. "Thackara came to me with this novel, 'America's Children,' but although he's someone I've always been immensely interested in, I never became his agent," Rogers told me. "I could never be sure if this was genius unleashed or a noble savage or something else. At the time, the books world was bursting at the seams, and one was hesitant about taking on people who were bound to mean a lot of editing work." She did, however, send him to Mike Petty, an energetic and down-to-earth connoisseur of "difficult" writing then at Chatto & Windus—a firm that later became part of Random House U.K. "I read 'America's Children,'" Petty says, "and found it an odd mixture of the absolutely brilliant and the slightly inept. A big problem for me was the dialogue, which just didn't sound like anything real people actually say—that is, it was just a vehicle for ideas. So I turned it down. But James wouldn't let me."

Thackara showed Petty the design he had devised for the book. It took the form of a family tree, crisscrossed with references, schematized every bit as elaborately as Joyce's scheme for "Ulysses." "And I caved in," Petty says. "I just thought, Who am I to turn down this obviously talented man? The subject of his book was so vast, the conception was so grand."

"America's Children" was indeed a début to be reckoned with. It's a lightly fictionalized life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Harvard scholar who, with a team of international scientists, constructed the world's first atomic bomb. Thackara shows Oppenheimer as a man who tried to harness himself to the juggernaut of history while trying to remain morally true to himself, and who suffered the consequences. In 1954, once his usefulness was over, he was denied a security clearance because of his Communist sympathies in the nineteen-thirties. Oppenheimer is portrayed throughout the book as a fatherly, pipe-smoking, magisterial figure who happens, almost incidentally, both to understand the universal laws of nature and to have the ability to synthesize art and science. But it's easy to miss the whole point, as Thackara explains: "A friend of Edward Teller's said to me, 'You know, really, Oppenheimer wasn't all *that* good,' and

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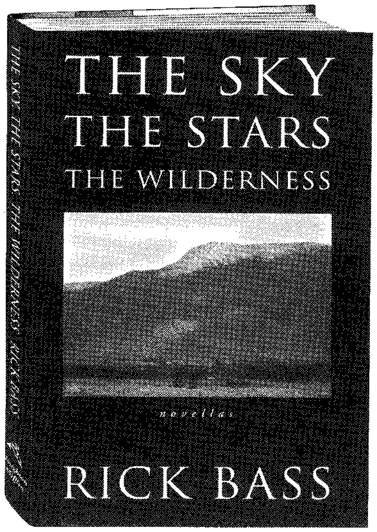

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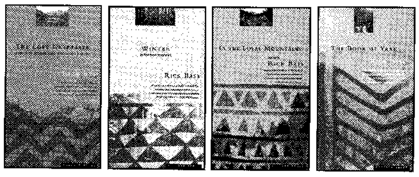

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I said, ‘I’m not writing about *Oppenheimer*, I’m writing about Faust and Prometheus.’ ”

“Obviously, it was a very dense book,” Petty says. “But I thought, I’m a big-shot editor, I’m up to this. So we sat in an airless, windowless boardroom for weeks, making changes, making it better. But Thackara is so *stubborn*. Anything that interferes with his vision has to be argued about *endlessly*.” Once, Petty recalls, he queried a piece of dialogue. “ ‘Look,’ I said. ‘You can’t say this. It’s bad dialogue. It’s bad art.’ Thackara said, ‘Faulkner could do that,’ and I said, ‘But, James, you’re not Faulkner.’ And he replied, ‘How do you know?’ ”

Petty became friends with his argumentative author, but he remains intrigued by Thackara’s obsessional qualities. “I’ve never met anyone with such a grand concept of his place in the scheme of things and in the traditions of literature. The most passionate and driven writer you can think of isn’t half as passionate and driven as James.” Thackara himself has a dismissive attitude toward contemporary writing. “To me, people like Barnes and Amis, they’re editorialists, they’re not really going into a subject. They’re quick at picking up on what’s a hot subject, they even have moments of being moral. But the language just dies on them. It’s modern, it’s very polished, and it’s dead. But I don’t read any modern English writers. My state of isolation and the fragility of my personality are so acute that were I to become immersed in what is going on around me I’d lose the thing I’ve built up, the thing that’s me. I’m somebody who doesn’t like ever sharing my toys.”

“America’s Children” was published in 1984. “Ahab’s Daughter” followed in 1988. It was a quite different book—a liberation from intellectual rigor into sensual awakening, as the virginal Kate Cooper flees from New England and her repressive father to a Greek island with her cousin Mark, and discovers the culture of Dionysus and Apollo. “It was sexy but highfalutin,” Petty says. “Good on sights and sounds and smells. The dialogue still creaked, though.”

But through the rewrites of “America’s Children” and the holiday spree of writing “Ahab’s Daughter,” through his marriage to the exceptionally supportive Davina and the birth of two daughters, and through a dozen financial crises, Thackara’s Great Work had been taking shape. By the end of the eighties, his money was finally running out. His marriage was under a strain. It was time for him to show that he could make some real money through his pen. It was time to turn “The Book of Kings” loose on the world.

The book is absorbing reading, but it’s exhausting—as much from the scope of the action as from the dense symbolic quagmire into which the unwary reader strays. It tracks Europe’s helpless drift toward Nazism and the Holocaust from 1932, when a quartet of students at the Sorbonne share an apartment on the Rue de Fleurus. Two of the students are German: one, Johannes, is a religious-minded philosopher of rarefied intellect who ignores his mother’s warnings about the new dictator; the other, David, is the liberal son of the aristocratic Italian-German baronial family of von Sunda, who have a palatial estate in Bavaria. A third is a half-French, half-Algerian scholarship student named Justin Lothaire, who falls in love with European culture and becomes its passionate defender, even as Sunda, the *echt* German, finds himself impotent and powerless in the face of the approaching wave of Nazi ruffians. Duncan Penn, a token American with a sentimental attachment to “old” Europe, completes the quartet whose lives mirror the larger picture.

The title alludes to the Old Testament, and the book refers to God’s prophetic warning to Samuel about the rise of a man-made king: “And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and will set them to make his instruments of war. . . . And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you.” Thackara watches Hitler’s rise from a dozen different perspectives: at Nuremberg rallies; as reported in dinner-table gossip; in close-up appearances at Hindenburg’s side; in letters and rumors of war; in the gradually thickening atmosphere of fright and inevitability.

“I suppose the book could be taken

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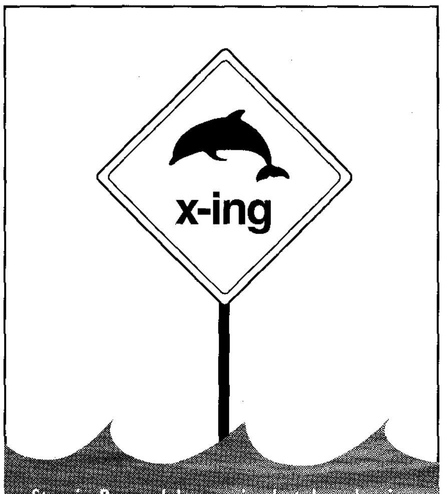

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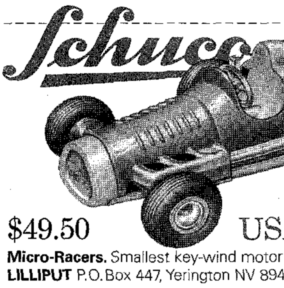

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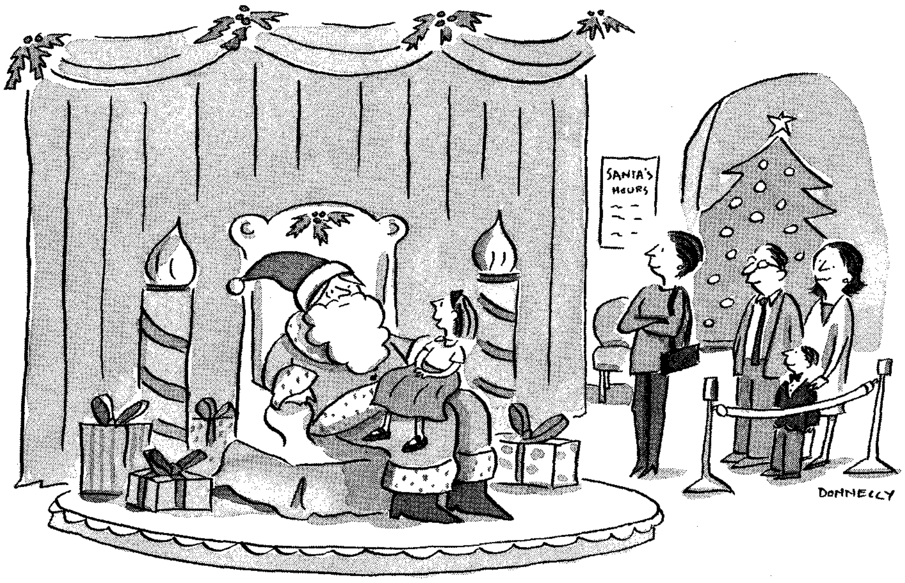


"I'd like more child support."

• •

as a geo-cultural self-portrait," Thackara told me, "in the sense that the Mediterranean, North Africa, Italy, and the other settings are all in my life. But it's also a geo-cultural portrait of Europe in its cataclysm. It's about the conflict between the Biblical values from the desert and the northern, Germanic values expressed in the rise of Wagner."

Whatever its significance, the book presents the modern reader with a daunting prospect. As Thackara hands over the manuscript—a thousand and ninety-two pages of paper, clothed in two folders tied with pink ribbons, inside a canvas tote bag—you feel yourself buckle under the strain. You read about visions of "murdered multitudes" and about dreams of classical heroes, about elegant dinners in Paris and opulent weddings by the Danube, about Hess meeting with his Nazi mystics in Berlin and Hitler eating *Sacher Torte* in a pavilion. The *jeunesse dorée* of France and Germany provides romance, complete with snow, sleighs, cobbles, ball gowns, chinchilla wraps, black horses, and a curious whiff of incest. And all the characters debate politics (and mythology and philosophy) as they feel the arms of the power state drawing more closely around them. The author himself joins in, appending a number of redundant editorials to the story ("In the European night, an immense brutality was awake"), as though he were uncertain whether he is writing a novel, a history, or a journalistic essay on the thirties.

Sometimes, when you're bogged down in the sententious conversational interchanges at one of the aristocratic dinners, or in another history lesson, you lose confidence in Thackara's ability to tell a story convincingly, to handle the front-of-stage narrative as well as the symbolic backdrop. But then you encounter one of the huge set-piece descriptions that punctuate the action, and are rocked on your heels. As when Justin, the French-Algerian visionary, goes on a tuna-fishing expedition. Thackara's fishing trip, starting in the natural world and climaxing in a vision of the heart of Christianity, is a clear raid on the territory of Hemingway and Melville, both of whom, were they alive, would recognize a kindred spirit in the modern author's passionate, ichthyolatrous imaginings. In a chapter called "Sedan," a German tank commander advances through the forests and meadows, the villages and towns of France in an unstoppable surge of machinery; it's hard to recall anywhere, short of the pages of Tolstoy, that the frenzy of conquest, the unholy new dawn of total warfare, are so confidently evoked. Later, an epic boat and train ride from Mexico to Berlin via Vladivostok brings David and his pregnant wife across half the world to confront the destiny of the Fatherland, into the whirlwind of history on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Russia. (And that's before we get to the Resistance movement, the Battle of the Bulge, and the concentration camp.) At such moments, Thackara's readers are amazed by his ability to write about the breaking of frontiers, both historical and imaginative, disdaining all sense of limits. They forgive him for a hundred faults of construction, of idiom, and of central-casting dialogue. And they wish, once again, that there could be someone—they themselves, perhaps—who would act as his adviser, editor, collaborator, buddy, amanuensis; who would be his Maxwell Perkins, the great editor who had been able to take the vast, rambling manuscripts of Thomas Wolfe and discover the passionate essence within.

In the fall of 1988, Thackara sent the manuscript of "The Book of Kings" to the eminent agent Anthony Sheil, whose client list includes John Banville and Michael Ignatieff. "The typescript arrived," Sheil recalls. "The tallest piece of writing I've ever seen. I read enough to be convinced that it was exceptional. There was no question that it was meant to be the 'War and Peace' of our time—the span, the breadth, the sheer scale of it. He's too good a writer for one to be able to say he's writing a Tolstoyan epic to make money. But clearly he was up to something like that."

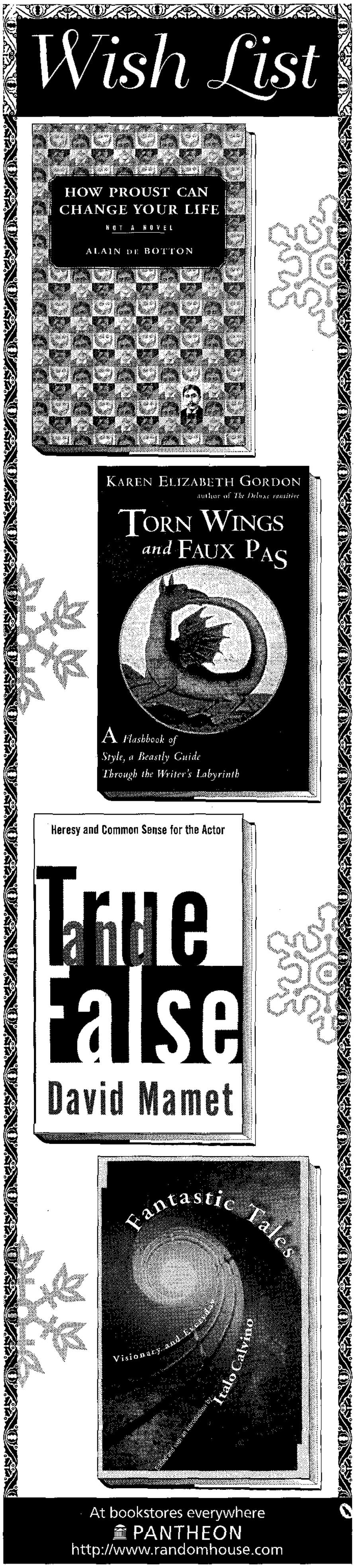
Sheil sent the typescript to eight British publishers and five American ones. All of them turned it down. "The Book of Kings" was, it seems, just too vast, too unwieldy, with its technical faults outshining its conceptual virtues, for the book trade to consider it a commercial proposition. But among the rejection letters was one from Bantam Press (owned by Transworld, one of Britain's most lucrative publishing conglomerates, which is itself owned by the European mega-publisher Bertelsmann), which to Anthony Sheil "seemed to get the point of what the book was doing better than any other." The letter was from a commissioning editor, James Cochrane, formerly of Penguin Books, whose function was to bring the brashly commercial press some intellectual credibility. "Like everyone else," Cochrane says, "I found it extremely interesting—but it required a massive amount of work to make it even publishable, and more than I was prepared to do."

The familiar litany was getting too much to bear. Thackara and Sheil were frustrated. Mike Petty, the editor of the two earlier books, couldn't help, having changed publishing houses. What could they do? Then a solution seemed to appear: a man whom Thackara could trust to take care of his manuscript; an American, like him, with shared interests, a delicate sensibility, and meticulous and scrupulous editing skills.

Norman Thomas di Giovanni is a short, bulky, and pugnacious man with the exiguous hair and horny handshake of an all-weather builder or a championship wrestler. Such an impression is reinforced when you meet him at his home—in the yachting community of Keyhaven, near Lymington, on the Hampshire coast—and discover him wearing paint-and-plaster-stained khaki pants and a round-necked sweater, and driving a white van. Despite twenty-five years in England, he has an accent strongly flavored with his native city, Boston, and a voice you could hear demanding hot dogs at a Red Sox game. It is difficult to credit that this ebullient roughneck was the distinguished translator of and collaborator with the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. But as he hurtles the van through Hampshire's sunny lanes you note that he has a shrewd and penetrating gaze, and realize that he hides a precise and meticulous nature behind a commonsensical front.

In his tiny cottage, di Giovanni reveals the extent of the Thackara File. From one huge gray metal receptacle, he takes out two dozen bulky envelopes containing the chapters of "The Book of Kings," each in several versions. Nearby, a large cardboard box is crammed with letters and typescripts. There are, he says, *eight thousand* pages all told.

"Thackara," di Giovanni says, "is the perfect example of the amateur artist—who can reach fantastic heights that other writers can't reach but, by the same token, can plumb some terrible lows. It's because they work on pure inspiration, but, without the ninety per cent perspiration that real artists put in, the flow of inspiration is not constant. The problem with Thackara is not that he can't write—in fact, he *can* write marvellous things—but that he can't re-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write. He is simply incapable of putting a clean sheet of paper in a typewriter. His idea of rewriting is changing the word 'red' to the word 'crimson.' "

Di Giovanni met Thackara in February, 1991. They were introduced by a man who was a friend of both—Alejandro Manara, an Italian Argentine. "We got on fine," di Giovanni recalls, "until I asked him if he wrote book reviews, and so on. I got a very lofty, chilly reply along the lines of 'Oh, journalism.' Then, a few days later, I gave a talk on Borges, and Thackara came to it. He rang me afterward and said, 'I know you're very busy, but I've got this novel and I'm told it needs an outside editor.'

"I remember asking how long the book was," di Giovanni says, "and when he said one thousand four hundred and seventy pages—a number that is now *sealed* into my whole *being*, right down to my *feet*—I should have said no. But"—he shrugs—"I like helping people. It's a failing with me."

In contemplating his task, he was partly reassured by the enthusiasm of James Cochrane, whom he knew to be a sagacious and serious editor. "Thackara told me that Cochrane had said he thought it was pretty good, so I rang him. Cochrane said that he thought there were some incredible things in it, but that it was impossible to publish in its present form—that it needed major surgery."

In late February, the masterpiece arrived, and di Giovanni read the first four hundred pages. "Some of it was great and sometimes it read as if written by someone aged fourteen. I kept waiting for the novel to collapse on itself, but it didn't." At lunch with the author and Cochrane, he pronounced what he had read "magnificent," and he started the most considerable editing feat of his life.

For a while, it was a honeymoon. The gnarled Boston roustabout and the high-strung California visionary went into the collaborative process full of mutual admiration and high hopes. "He loved our relationship, because he loved praise," di Giovanni says. "He'd say, 'I'm so pleased you love my book, but I want you to love me as well.' "

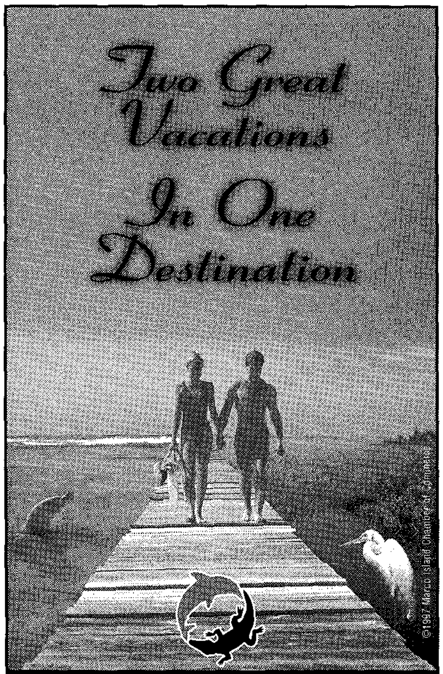
Thackara's memories of the relationship are less fond. "Writers are supposed by some people to be maverick, tempestuous types," he says. "I'm not like that. I'm a quiet, contained person. Norman was the one who behaved like an artist and threw things around. He even moved into my *house*." He is adamant in maintaining that di Giovanni's contribution to the book was slight. "If you look at the first forty pages, he changed the rhythms—he wanted it more clipped, more like Borges. He wanted it shorter, more rational. The redone pages came through the post, and I was appalled."

As the two deracinated Americans—one bullying, abusive, and blunt, and the other hypersensitive, ironic, and oblique—struggled to forge an alliance, things were happening elsewhere. Anthony Sheil had managed to interest Bantam Press in considering an edited version of the book. Sheil sent a revised chapter to the editorial board at Bantam and suggested a meeting. The board agreed. Sheil and di Giovanni went to it and endured a two-hour grilling from the Bantam senior management. Di Giovanni stood in for Thackara, and proved an effective advocate. He talked passionately about the book as a classic, a masterpiece, a work of Tolstoyan sweep and wonder. He sawed the air with his hands. He banged his fists on the table.

At the end, Bantam Press agreed on the figure of a hundred and five thousand pounds as an advance against royalties, provided that di Giovanni continue to edit the manuscript as he had begun to. A contract was signed, saying that Norman Thomas di Giovanni would get twenty-five per cent of James Thackara's advance fee and of any royalties or earnings.

A contract! At last! Anthony Sheil rang Thackara to tell him that his twenty-five-year wait for recognition was over. His masterpiece was redeemed. "And do you know the first thing he did?" di Giovanni demands. "The son of a bitch goes to Jim Cochrane and says, 'Can we get rid of Norman now?' He thought that once he'd got a contract he didn't need an editor anymore."

That was the start of the worst time of Thackara's life. He watched with agony as his lifework was pulled this way and that, every page—every line, practically every word—inspected, challenged, and criticized. He recalls that di Giovanni suggested jettisoning major char-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acters, beefing up the action, losing the discursive qualities. To Thackara, it was a horrible invasion of his carefully structured world, his years of honing and shaping, in which every one of ten thousand sentences had come to seem perfect, marmoreal, set in stone. All the cavils of his new editor, the pusillanimity of British publishers, the readiness of his agent to agree to this enforced marriage made him feel not like Tolstoy but like Gulliver, pinned down by a thousand little threads of Philistine venom.

When you read through the edited manuscript, as word-processed by di Giovanni, you see that on many pages changes from the original text have been incorporated into the new version, with each one duly explained in a parenthesis in di Giovanni's abrasive style; but each parenthesis has then been angrily crossed out by Thackara and a counter-explanation appended in the margin. The exchanges are initially friendly, but they rapidly become testy. You can read a spat over this passage: "He lay staring up at the faint ceiling. For several moments the sensation lingered of something desperately sweet. His father's house on the Vistula, the morning of a hunt? In Alsace, before the Great War? The bitterly cold attic at Karlsruhe Academy?" What, inquires di Giovanni, is so goddamned "sweet" about the memory of a freezing attic? His inquiry is silenced by a black pencil, and a marginal note explains to him, "Dreams are sweet—and for a military man, the bitter cold also a pleasure." So there. "What has happened to you on this first page?" Thackara asks di Giovanni crossly at the start of another chapter. "You seem to need one finely-tuned ambiguity after another to be turned into historical rote. I will have to work the next seventy pages without your cool and measured help."

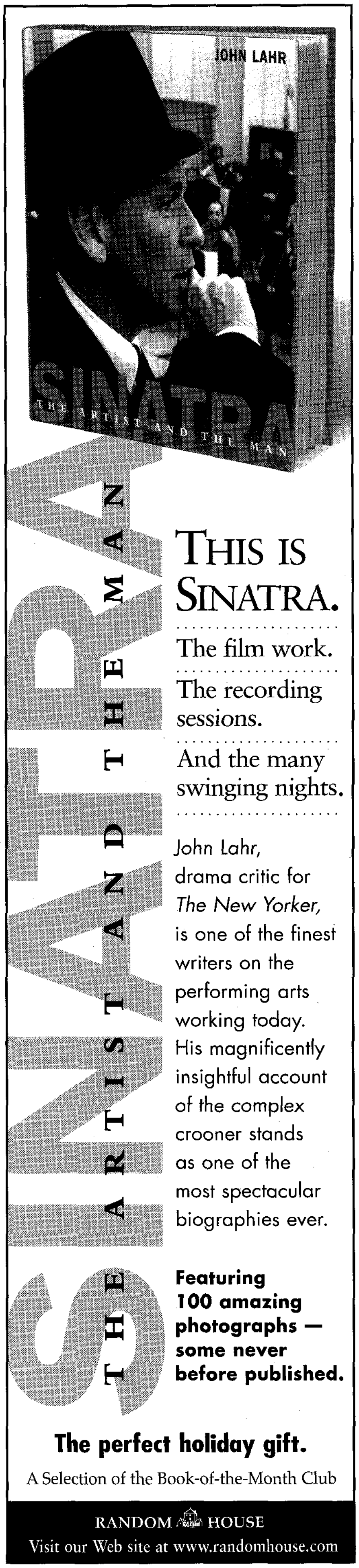
Remembering the experience, di Giovanni lists Thackara's shortcomings. How he could not distinguish between "who" and "whom" and would wrench a sentence into an unfeasible tangle to avoid using either word. How he invariably spelled "capital" as "capitol" and how he had a character "pouring over" a magazine. How he would never say "Paris" if he could say "the capitol [sic] of the French." How his fascination with rich Europeans led him to overuse the word "elegant." Di Giovanni goes on, "And 'abruptly'—I told Jim Cochrane, 'If he ever uses the word "abruptly" again, I will kill him, and you *and* me. The same goes if he uses any more sentences beginning with "But." ' Or the way the last sentence of every section always began with 'And.' "

Di Giovanni recalls that during one of their many fights about correct usage Thackara said, "Look—I'm a postmodernist. Is all this grammar really necessary?" "James," di Giovanni said, "we're talking on this phone *in grammar*."

But as di Giovanni raves on about this unlikely convergence or that implausible episode, as he relives the trauma of trying to decide whether the half-Italian wife of a German baron would really straighten her son's tie during a society wedding ("No aristocrat would ever do that—that's what a Jewish mother would do at a New Jersey wedding"), it becomes clear that the breakdown in their relationship had more to do with a clash of personalities than with the struggle for the soul of a masterpiece.

However, this purgatory appeared to be rewarded on September 15, 1991, when Anthony Sheil wrote to Cochrane, congratulating him and di Giovanni on the first half of the novel. "It seems to me that we now have a book, where before we had not," he wrote, and he called it "a magnificent achievement." Ominously, though, he went on, "I am concerned to hear from Norman that the mode of work has now changed. . . . I understand that this is because James wants to do it himself." Thackara had decided that he could edit the rest of the novel himself. "He wanted to feel it was his work, and not mine," di Giovanni says. "He was afraid that the book wouldn't be recognized as his own book. But that's bullshit. I was just a paid editor."

For months, a curious form of stalemate ensued. Di Giovanni sent Thackara amended chapters, and Thackara would return them with some of his original text restored. "It all got slightly mad," Cochrane recalls. "I'd send James a letter with pages of requests that he change this or rewrite that, pointing out historical errors or impossible events. He would send a letter back as



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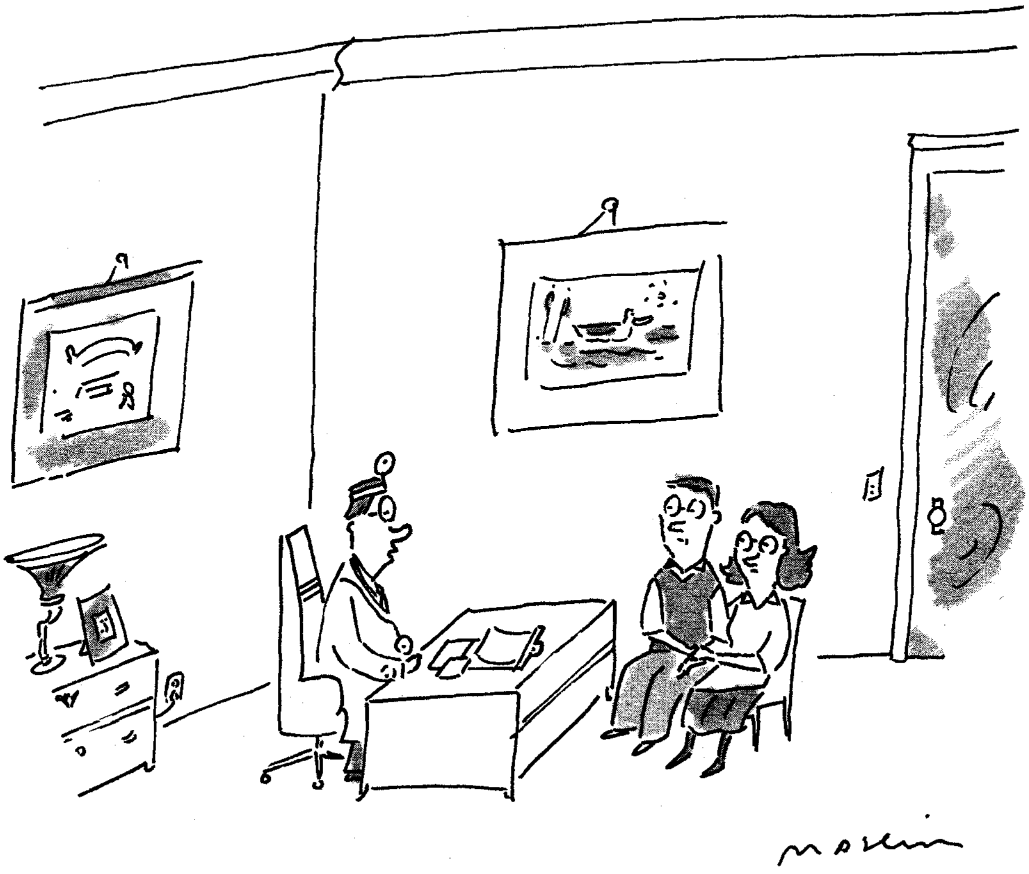
if I'd written nothing but praise, ignoring all my demands. We were still trying to make the book work, but each time the work advanced a bit it was sabotaged by James." According to Thackara, di Giovanni was a relentless adversary who would send Thackara's work back again and again, insisting that "I can't accept that image there, those clothes there, that is not the way people do it." Di Giovanni was on the telephone every day (Thackara's own phone bill ran into the thousands of pounds), but it was clear that their relationship was in terminal disarray.

The deadline loomed and, with it, the prospect of financial ruin. Bantam Press, furious that the project had broken down, was on the point of demanding back the thirty thousand pounds it had paid Thackara. "It would have meant selling my house, putting my life up for grabs," the author says. "They could even have blocked the copyright."

His savior was Sonia Land, a tough, Singapore-born former associate of Rupert Murdoch, who had gone into partnership with Anthony Sheil in 1990, forming Sheil Land Associates. She proposed that Thackara could keep his advance from Bantam but would have to pay back a percentage if his book should be accepted by another publisher. It was her view that the first half, as edited by di Giovanni, was "outstanding, really fantastic," but that the second half dragged badly and was full of inconsistencies. She tried other publishers, but without success. One that did seem sufficiently enterprising was HarperCollins, owned by her old boss, Murdoch. The publisher, Stuart Proffitt, was interested, but felt that the book needed more work. Thackara enlisted the help of a young editor, Katherine Bucknell, who knew Proffitt from university. For a year and a half, on and off, they worked on the recalcitrant masterpiece together, "but to my surprise," Land says, "they were editing the first half." When it was handed in, Proffitt turned it down. "This had become such an odyssey," Land says, "that I got the feeling word had spread that it was going to be difficult for anyone to edit it with James's approval."

Author and agent regarded each other coldly. They, too, had reached a stalemate. Land felt that she had done everything possible to find a home for the Great Work. Thackara felt that she had been too distracted by some legal wranglings concerning the agency to give it her proper attention. Land had one final suggestion to make—a last-ditch effort, the lowest sanction available to the professional writer. "I said, 'Let me get you a very well known writer, who is prepared to work on the second half, and you can arrange some kind of joint authorship. The publishers would accept it. You've just got to stand back and let the second half get written so it flows.' " Thackara's response was curt and nonnegotiable. There was no way anyone but he was going to get credit for "The Book of Kings." It was his vision, his masterpiece, his life.

THERE'S no moral to this tale, but final assessments of its significance vary. "I still think it would be possible to turn 'The Book of Kings' into a magnificent novel," Anthony Sheil says. "But I doubt if we're all going to live long enough to see the end of the project. You have to respect his attitude. After all, who are we to say? The genius is the author, not the editor."



"No, I haven't performed the procedure myself, but I've seen it done successfully on 'E.R.' and 'Chicago Hope.' "

"His stubbornness is admirable, provided his own assessment of his strength is a true one," the agent Deborah Rogers says. "But you often get writers whose idea of what they're doing is not yet fully realized."

"In my view, he's some kind of genius," Mike Petty says. "The trouble is I don't know what kind and nor does anybody else."

"I read the book almost as if it had been written by two people," Sonia Land says. "Thackara has bouts of real brilliance and other times when he seems to lack all common sense. His biggest problem is that he thinks he's perfect and so is his book. He just can't believe there are any flaws in his genius."

Thackara himself sits at home, mutedly triumphant. He is deep into a new novel,

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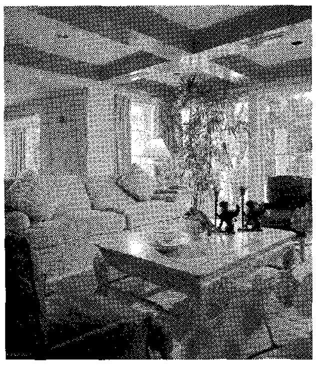

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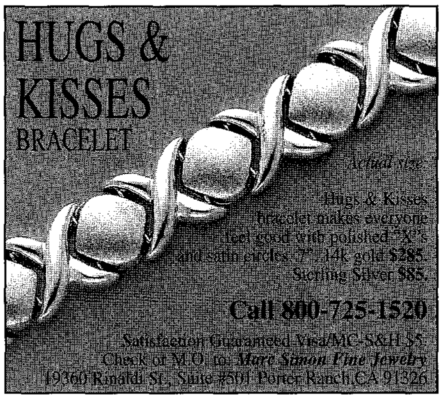

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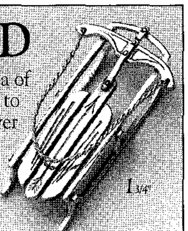

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about London, and he is a happy man. "I'm emotionally free of it all now, and it's a triumph for me," he says. "The book is unfettered. The battle is over. The manuscript won, and it's a stirring victory." He has wrested his masterpiece back from, in his view, the grip of knaves and unbelievers, and he seems weirdly untroubled by its lack of publication. True to his persona of God-like artistic detachment, he affects not to care for the contingent praises of the ordinary world. "I can wait around for another fifteen years," he says, "and maybe get George Steiner and five hundred words, which may be all the critical appraisal I'll get in my lifetime."

Recently, however, things have been looking up. In September, Thackara was taken on by Ed Victor, the London-based American agent who numbers Douglas Adams and Iris Murdoch among his charges. "James needs inspiration," Victor says. "There are some extraordinary things in his book. It has all the elements for a fabulous novel. All it needs is some help with the connective tissue, from an in-house editor who can help him to find writerly solutions rather than give him editorial dictates." He is about to send the book to a select band of American publishers. "I'm just waiting for January, when publishers return to their desks, full of hope and turkey. I just know this will be the year of 'The Book of Kings.'" His confidence is touching. This could well be the start of Thackara's apotheosis—the wave of understanding, recognition, and critical acclaim that has eluded him in the last thirty years. But it could as easily be a fresh hell of unwelcome collaboration, unfeasible compromise, and the dabbling fingers of interfering philistines.

If, by definition, "genius" means an extraordinary imaginative capacity beyond our own meagre limits of apprehension, how can we presume to judge the scale of such a mind when we meet it? Thackara has been trading on this philosophical crux throughout his career, shaking his head sadly at the presumption of so many agents, publishers, and critics. By turns brilliant, stubborn, and enragingly perverse, he has learned two big lessons from his life and from his long immersion in the Western canon: one, geniuses do not need to compromise; two, wise boys never share their toys. ♦

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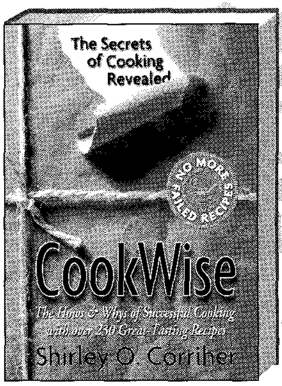

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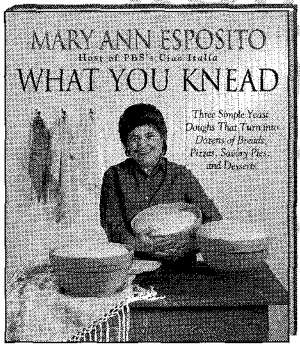

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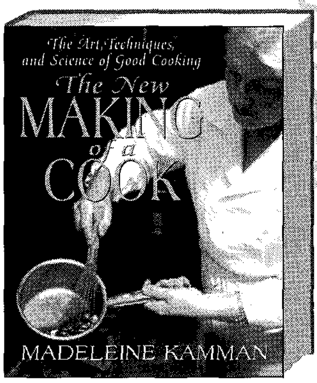

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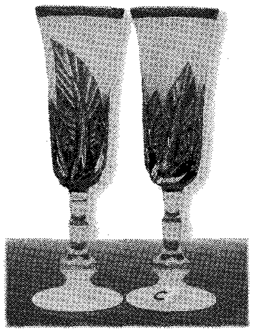

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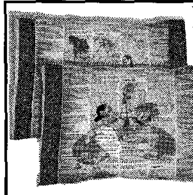

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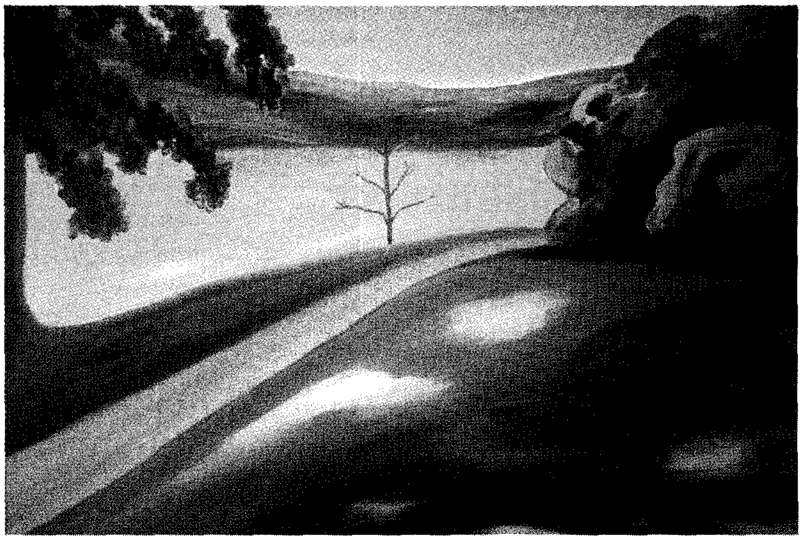
PERSONAL HISTORY

THE BURDEN OF THE FEAST

Beans, corn, and endless varieties of root vegetable—is this the stuff of an obsession?

BY BOBBIE ANN MASON

THIS Christmas, my two sisters and my brother and I, along with our families, will head toward home, our real home, which is where our seventy-eight-year-old mother, Christy, lives, in western Kentucky. She'll be ready for us with the usual Christmas feast, and what I'm looking forward to most is the green beans and sweet potatoes and creamed corn, the farm fare that once seemed so oppressively ordinary to me. When I was growing up on our fifty-three-acre dairy farm, we were obsessed with food. Food was the center of our lives. Everything we did, every day, revolved around it. We planted it, grew it, harvested it, peeled it, cooked it, served it, consumed it—endlessly, day after day, season after season. This was life on a farm. I can appreciate the value of a country upbringing now, but when I was a girl all that toil drove me crazy.



The land was inviting, but depending on its bounty could trouble your dreams.

LANELLE MASON

One day my mother and my grandmother were shelling beans and talking about the proper method of drying apples. I was eleven and entirely absorbed with the March girls in "Little Women." Drying apples was not in my dreams. Beth's death was weighing darkly on me at that moment, and I threw a little tantrum—what Mama called a hissy fit.

"Can't y'all talk about anything but food?" I screamed.

There was a shocked silence. "Well, what else is there?" Granny asked.

Granny didn't question her duties, but I did. I didn't want to be hulling beans in a hot kitchen when I was fifty years old. I wanted to be somebody, maybe an airline stewardess. Also, I had been listening to the radio. I had notions.

Life for our family was haunted by the fear of crop failure. We ate as if we didn't know where our next meal might come from. All my life, I have had a recurrent food dream: I face a buffet or cafeteria line, laden with beautiful foods. I spend the entire dream choosing the foods I want. The anticipation of eating them is deliciously agonizing. I always wake up just as I've made my selections but before I get to eat.

Working with food was fraught with anxiety and desperation when I was a girl. Like all farmers, we were at the mercy of the weather, and it wasn't to be trusted. My mother watched the skies at evening for any portent of the morrow. A cloud that went over and then turned around and came back was an especially bad

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shrug came to seem pointless.
Mock on, mock on, droll

ornithological
Voltaire—your wit, as circumstances
shrink, is our survival.

—Amy Clampitt

sign. Our livelihood—even our lives—depended on forces outside our control.

I think this dependence on nature was at the core of my rebellion. I hated the constant sense of helplessness before vast forces, the continuous threat of failure. Farmers didn't take the initiative, I began to see; they reacted to whatever presented itself. More than that, though, I disliked women's part in that dependence.

My mother had been raised in a large farm family—kinfolks who had taken her in when she was orphaned—but they had little time for her. One Christmas the only present she got was an orange, while her cousins got dolls. Her life had been hard, and so she allowed me to get spoiled. She never even tried to teach me to cook. "You didn't want to learn," she says now. "You were always busy doing something. You had your nose in a book."

From the front yard, where I sat reading under a maple tree, I could see my mother stooped over in the garden and my father on his tractor, far back in the field. No wonder I believed that progress meant freedom from the field and the range. That meant moving to town, I thought. Because we lived only a mile outside the town of Mayfield, I was acutely conscious of being country. I felt inferior to people in town because we had to grow our food and make our clothes; we couldn't just go buy things, the way they did. Although we were self-sufficient and resourceful and held clear title to our land, we farm people lived in a state of psychological poverty. We felt that the fine life in town—celebrated in magazines, on radio, in movies—was denied us. Of course, we weren't poor at all—I knew that. Poor people had too many kids, and they weren't landowners; they rented decrepit little houses with plank floors and trash in the yard. "Poor people are wormy and eat wild onions," Mama said. We weren't poor, but we were country.

We had three wardrobes—everyday clothes, school clothes, and Sunday clothes. We didn't wear our school clothes at home, but we could wear them to town. When we got home from church, we had to change back into everyday before we ate Mama's big Sunday dinner. "Don't eat in your good clothes!" Mama always cried. "You'll spill something on them."

The truth was, Mama was a natural cook. At harvest time, after she'd got in from the garden and put out a wash, she would whip up a noontime dinner for the men in the field—my father and grandfather and maybe some neighbors and a couple of hired hands: fried chicken with milk gravy, ham, mashed potatoes, lima beans, field peas, corn, slaw, sliced tomatoes, fried apples, biscuits, and peach pie. This was not considered a banquet, only

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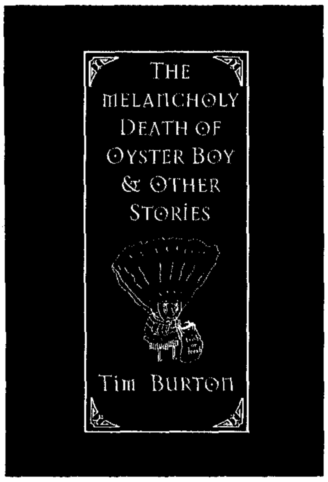
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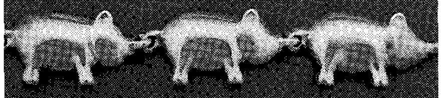

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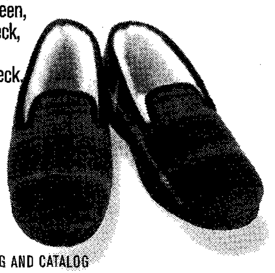

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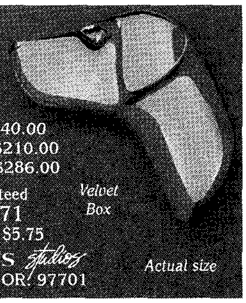

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plain hearty food, fuel for work. All the ingredients except the flour, sugar, and salt came from the farm—the chickens, the hogs, the milk and butter, the potatoes from the potato patch, the beans, peas, corn, cabbage, apples, peaches. Nothing was processed, except by her. She was always butchering and plucking and planting and hoeing and shredding and slicing and creaming (scraping cobs for the creamed corn), and pressure-cooking and canning and freezing and thawing and mixing and shaping and baking and frying.

We were known to eat our pie right on the same plate as our turnip greens so as not to mess up another dish. It didn't matter if the peach cobbler oozed all over the turnip-green juice and the pork grease. "It all goes to the same place," Mama said. We never used napkins, and our table manners were boarding-house reach—no "Pass the peas, please." Conversation detracted from the sensuous pleasure of filling yourself. Every meal required meat and vegetables and dessert. We drank milk and iced tea ("ice-tea"). Our salads were fruit Jell-O and slaw. We also ate "poke salet" and wilted lettuce. Mama picked tender young pokeweed in the woods in the spring, before it turned poison, and cooked it a long time to get the bitterness out. We liked it with vinegar and minced boiled eggs. Wilted lettuce was tender new lettuce, shredded, with sliced radishes and green onions, and blasted with hot bacon grease to blanch the rawness. "Too many fresh vegetables in the summer gives people the scours," Daddy said.

JULY was blackberry-picking time. Mama would come back from the fields, where patches of "tame" berries had spread along the fencerows and creek banks, and exclaim, "There are worlds of berries down there!" She always "engaged" the berries to customers. By June, she would say, "I've already got forty gallons of berries engaged."

We strode out at dawn, in the dew, and picked until the midmorning sun bore down on our heads. To protect her hands from the thorns, Mama made gloves from old bluejeans, with the fingertips cut out. Following the berries down onto the creek bank, we perched on ledges and tiptoed on unsure footing through thickets. We tunnelled. When Mama saw an especially large berry just out of reach, she would

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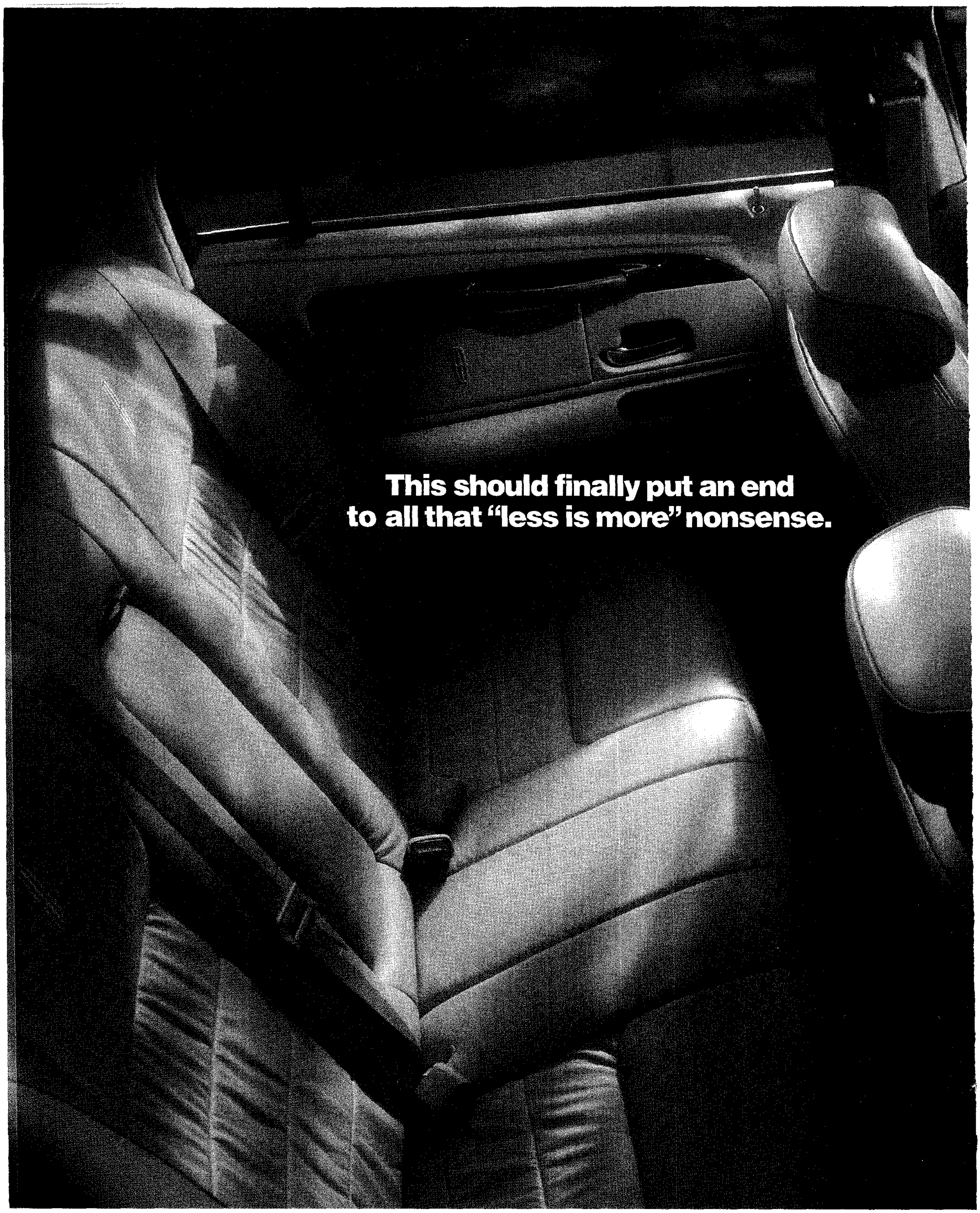
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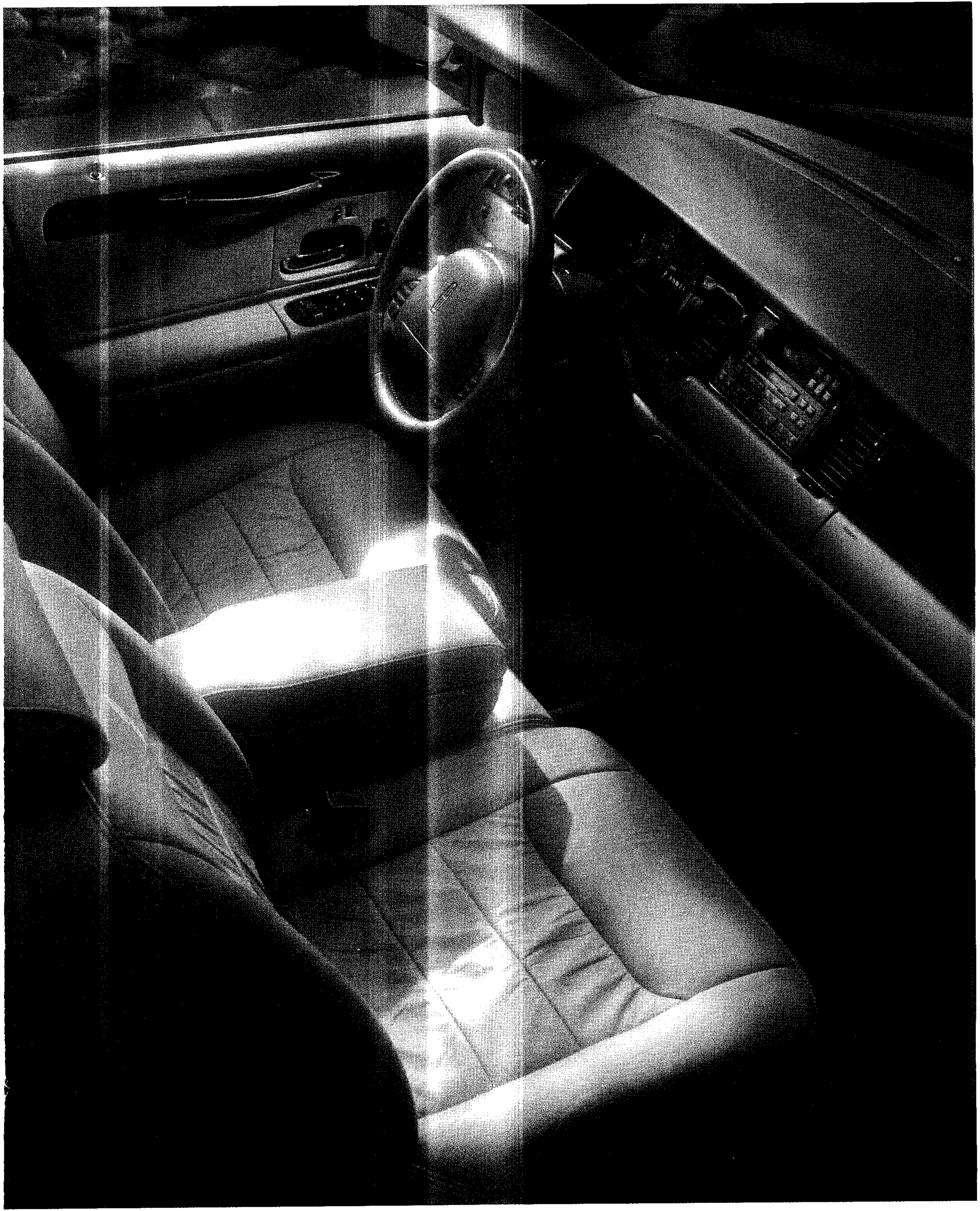

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lean her body against the bush and let it support her while she plucked the prize. We picked in quart baskets, then poured the berries into red-and-white Krey lard buckets. The berries settled quickly, and Mama picked an extra quart to top off the buckets. By nine o'clock, the sun was high, and I struggled to the house with my four gallons of blackberries, eager to wash the chiggers off and eat some cereal.

From the blackberries, I learned about money. I wouldn't eat the berries, even on my cereal: I wanted the money from selling them. Granny said everything was food, but I was hungry for something else—a kind of food that didn't grow in the ground. Yet I couldn't deny that we were always feasting. We ate sumptuous meals, never missing dessert. At Christmas, we slurped gallons of boiled custard. Once in a while, Daddy brought home exotic treats—fried oysters in little goldfish cartons and hot tamales wrapped in corn shucks.

Food was better in town, we thought. It wasn't plain and ordinary and everyday. The main pleasures were there, too—the barbecue places, the movie shows, all the places to buy things. Woolworth's, with the pneumatic tubes overhead rushing money along a metallic mole tunnel up to a balcony. Lochridge & Ridgway, with an engraved sign on the third-story cornice: “Stoves, Appliances, Plows.” On the mezzanine at that store, I bought my first phonograph records, brittle 78s of big-band music—Woody Herman and Glenn Miller, and Glen Gray and his Casa Loma Orchestra playing “No Name Jive.” A circuit of the square took you past the grand furniture stores, the two dime stores, the shoe stores, the men's stores, the ladies' stores, the banks, the drugstores. You'd walk past the poolroom and an exhaust fan would blow the intoxicating smell of hamburgers in your face. Before she bought a freezer, Mama kept our meat in a rented food locker in town, near the ice company. She stored the butchered calf there, and she fetched hunks each week to fry. But hamburgers in town were better. They were greasier, and they came in waxed-paper packages.

At the corner drugstore, on the courthouse square, Mama and my younger sister Janice and I sat at filigreed wrought-iron tables on a black-and-white mosaic tile floor, eating peppermint ice cream. It was cold in there, under the ceiling fans. The ice cream was served elegantly, in paper cones sunk into black plastic holders. We were uptown.

IN the summer of 1954, when I was about to enter high school, my mother got a chance to run a restaurant not far from our house, up on Highway 45. My parents knew the owner, and one day he stopped by and asked Mama if she'd like to manage it. She jumped at the opportunity to earn some money. “Why, anybody could cook hamburgers and French fries for the public,” Mama said confidently. “That would be easy.”

She was eager for a chance to buy us things. After the war, she had wanted Daddy to get out of dairy farming and run a small business of some kind, something that would bring in more cash, but he had refused to leave his parents' farm. He was an only child, and my grandparents depended on him to carry on. Mama had swallowed her disappointment. She was resilient and optimistic—when Janice and I were growing up, we always saw her sparkling like morning dew—and she always wanted more for her children.

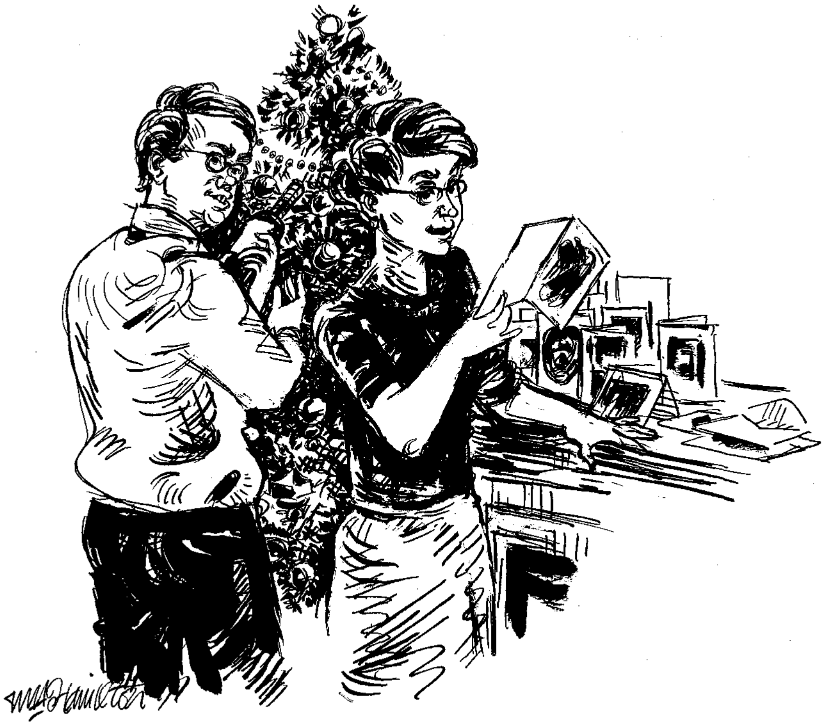
She went to inspect the Mayfield Restaurant—a square cinder-block building with a picture-window view of the highway. There were no trees around, just a gravelled parking area. It was an informal sort of place, with a simple kitchen in back, a few pots and pans, a deep fryer, and a grill. There were five or six tables and a counter with stools. Mama saw potential. “Catfish platters,” she said, with her face alight. “Fish and hush puppies. Slaw. French fries.”

I was so excited I couldn't sleep. Running our own little restaurant could mean we wouldn't have to work in the garden. I wanted nothing more to do with okra and beans. I longed for deliverance and an endless supply of Co'-Colas.

A restaurant would hold no fears for her. “It's a chance to make big money,” she told me. She told the owner she would try it for two weeks. If she liked the work, the deal was, she would be permitted to rent the business, for a hundred dollars a month.

“If it works out, maybe I could make a hundred dollars a *week*,” she said.

I tagged along. I felt important waiting



"God, how earnest. Whales on recycled paper."

• •

on customers—strangers driving along the highway and stopping right where I was for a bite to eat. I wanted to meet somebody from New York. When I drew glasses of Coca-Cola from the fountain, the Coke fizzed over crushed ice. I made grilled-cheese sandwiches in the grilled-cheese machine. I experimented with milkshakes. I was flying.

Most of all, I loved the jukebox. The first week Mama was there, the jukebox man came by to change records and insert new red-rimmed paper strips of titles: Doris Day and Johnnie Ray duets, "Teardrops from My Eyes," by Ruth Brown, and "P.S. I Love You," by a Kentucky vocal group called the Hilltoppers. I listened avidly to everything. I was fourteen and deeply concerned about my suntan, and I was saving pocket money to buy records.

The restaurant also had a television set, which sat in a corner with a "television light" on top—a prism of soft colors which supposedly kept people from ruining their eyes on TV waves. I had no experience with television, and I was captivated by Donald O'Connor's variety show and "I Love Lucy." When the evening crowd came in, Mama was kept busy as she trotted back and forth from the kitchen with her hamburger platters and catfish platters, but she would stop and laugh at something Lucy and Ethel were doing on the screen.

TWO days before the trial period was up, Mama stopped going to the restaurant. She didn't give up the job voluntarily. My grandfather had stepped in and told her she couldn't go on. "We need you here at home," he said. "Running a hamburger joint out on the highway ain't fitten work."

Daddy—who had his own part-time job, delivering milk for a dairy—didn't stand up for her. "How would you make any money, anyway?" he demanded. "By the time you pay out that hundred dollars a month rent and all the expenses, you won't have nothing left. First thing you know, you'll get behind and then you'll be owing *him*."

Granny said, "And who's going to do your cooking here at home?"

Mama didn't mention the restaurant again, but I thought I saw a little fire go out of her. My own flame was burning brighter. I had had a glimpse of life outside the farm, and I wanted it. I can still see Mama emerging from that restaurant kitchen, carrying two hamburger platters and gabbing with her customers as if they were old friends who had dropped in to visit and sit a spell. In the glass of the picture window, reflections from the television set flicker like Christmas candles. ♦

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FICTION

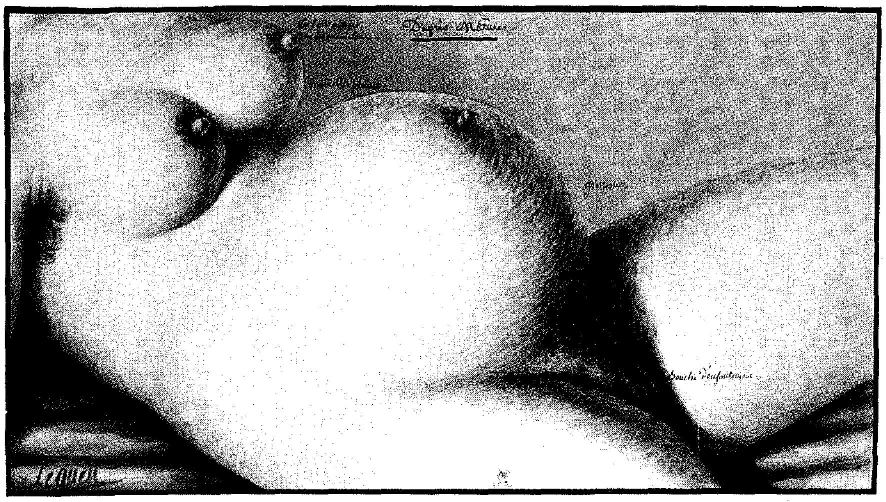
THE DEACON

The miracle of childbirth.

BY GEORGE SAUNDERS

MANY thousands of hours later, it had come to pushing, the land of pushing was the promised land, the land not of hope but of the hope of hope, and they had finally made it, and she was pushing, shouting louder than he had ever heard anyone shout, there was a buzzing in his ears, and the clock, forget about it, sometimes it even went backward.

Oh, it was wonderful to be here, yes, this was the seat of life, all life began in this way, but also it was terrible to be here, too much blood, too much screaming. It was quite frightening, really, and part of him wished that Dor would sense his extreme discomfort and banish him authoritatively from the room, which was what he would do, he felt, if he were in labor and Dor were in extreme discomfort, although, in fairness, he had always had a high tolerance for pain, and in fact last summer, when stung in the ear by two bees at once, had not even fallen off the ladder, which Dor would definitely have done, even if she'd been stung by only one bee in the ear.



"Oh, it was wonderful to be here, yes, this was the seat of life—but also it was terrible."

Then a nurse with a braided red-and-yellow wire that ended in a kind of clip reached between Dor's stirruped legs and gave the clip a little twist.

"There," she said. "Now we can see what Baby's little heart thinks of all this commotion." Baby's heartbeat now appeared on a screen as a periodic blip.

Would he like to see Baby's head?

Good God. Baby had hair. Baby's fair hair could be seen between Dor's legs. Dor was far, far away, doing something technical that only she could do, they were bringing metal things and taking metal things away, there was a kind of concentrated fury around the bed, one metal thing dropped and a nurse kicked it across the room, and then Doctor, their blunt-looking doctor with the straight-cut bangs, who had finally arrived, just this minute, he'd been pruning his hedges, stepped over the wire leading into Baby's head and asked how the deacon liked being a deacon. What in the world? Dor was dying and Baby was dying because Dor couldn't push Baby out, but Doctor seemed to want an answer before he would make the next thing happen. Dor had to push and scream and eventually rip open, and he had to answer Doctor's impossibly stupid question, so he said what he always said, that he loved his job but lately was doing less and less hands-on work with parishioners and more and more pure administration, and then Doctor shouted, "Get your catcher's mitt!" and lunged forward to receive the thing now extruding from Dor, and the deacon, waiting for the face, waiting and waiting, thought, Oh God, poor Dor, she has worked so hard and suffered so much, and all for nothing, because their baby was a monster. Their baby had no face. Where the face should have been was only a hairy dome. There were no eyes or mouth or nose, just hair and massive skin folds. My God, how had this happened? How had Doctor missed this huge blank face on the sonogram, the quack, the bastard? They had a monster. What had they done to deserve this?

And with sudden, deep sickness he saw himself crossing the dairy farm those many, many nights.

Was that it? Was he being punished for that? All his life he had been good, very good, exceptionally good, timid, obedient, the butt of jokes, the most fair-skinned, always sunburned, awkward at ballgames, large-reared, effeminate, but good, he had never intentionally done wrong, not really, not until this thing. He had tried to stop, but Dor was so big-bellied and birdlike and hostile, blue veins showed in her breasts, she was always snapping at him, they had been living through a very dark time, and the walks to the dairy farm had been his only consolation, and, oh God, he had gone even last night! Last night as the water broke had God seen him standing in the lilac and changed their perfectly fine baby into a monster? He saw the long years stretching ahead of them, the teasing, the cruel jokes, the stares, perhaps Baby would have to wear some kind of padded helmet to protect its huge sensitive head, perhaps Baby, having no eyes, would be blind, and how then would it get to school? He must now want nothing more than to serve these two wronged souls, he knew that, forever repentant for what he had done, and he would, if God would give him the strength, but God wouldn't, because clearly God had turned against him, the bully, today God had revealed Himself to be a petty tyrant with a mean streak, avenging Himself on a poor little baby by obliterating its tiny potential face.

And then someone was slapping him on the back: the idiotic quack of a doctor, who still had bits of hedge trimmings in his hair.

"Something, eh, isn't she, yes?" he seemed to be saying.

"A lovey-dove!" said a nurse.

"A gorgeous girl baby!" shouted an-

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other, starting for the door with a pan of bloody liquid.

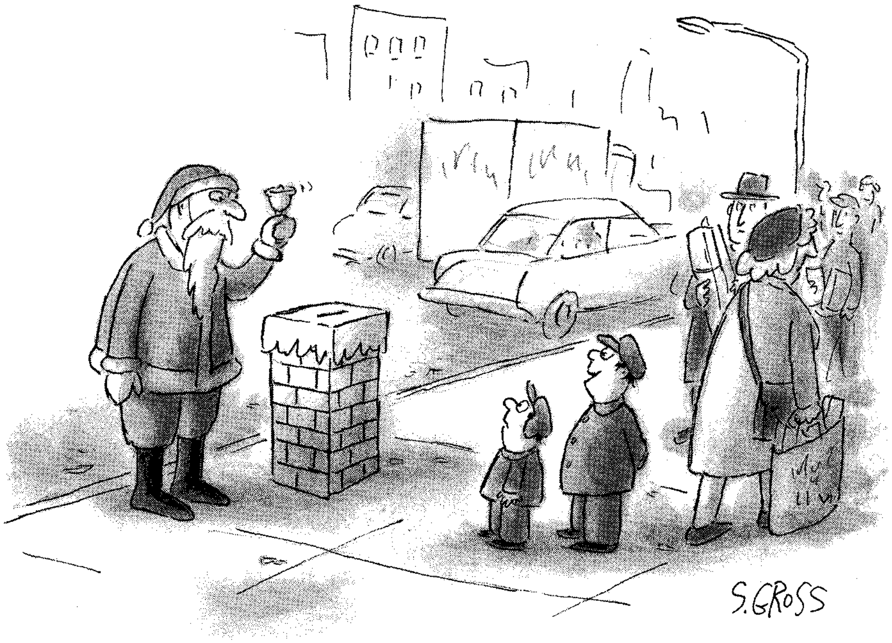
And looking down he saw, to his amazement, that Baby was a baby. Baby, just now fully extruded, had, after all, a nose and eyes and so forth, and everything was actually just where it should be, all scaled correctly, and Baby was even somewhat pretty. Baby was a girl. A lovely girl! A lovely girl with a whole face! The problem was, the problem had been, rather—there was no problem now, none whatsoever—the problem had been that Baby was perhaps three times as large as he had expected, based on what he had seen of Baby's head between Dor's legs, so that what had seemed to him a domed hairy absence of face had been, ha-ha, in actuality only her forehead, and why hadn't they warned him in Lamaze, those nuts! He'd been doing a funeral the day of the film! Baby was bloody, true, Baby's head was not exactly perfectly round, Baby's face seemed painted over with sulfur, but so what! It was a baby! It was a lovely, intact baby, it was his baby, his daughter, wearing a stocking cap, a crazy little yellow-faced sailor, the little sweetheart, with crossed eyes, trying to see him, and hello! hello! You gave me quite a scare, you!

He kissed Dor, he hugged Dor, they waved at Baby as Baby was taken away for tests.

He must now call the church. Many were waiting to hear the joyous news.

"Hurry back," Dor said weakly, and he patted her bright red cheek.

Walking, then nearly running, briskly, celebratorily, leaping now to tap the ceiling, he sprinted down the hall, past the water fountain, the desk, the bad oil of a dog on horseback, to call Mrs. Red at church, good old Mrs. Red, whom he had always found squatty and arrogant and dull but who, he now realized, had once been a baby herself! A cute little probably beloved baby, who had gradually grown fat and mustached and gassy. Well, Baby wouldn't grow fat and mustached and gassy, because Mrs. Red's father was old Norm Denicki, a cross-eyed drunk who stammered, whereas Baby's father was him, the deacon, a man of certain gifts, gifts of discernment and vision and language, everyone said so, everyone had always said so, and he wasn't bragging, he was just happy, happy to have these gifts to offer Baby, who would soon be needing a name! Plus Baby had Dor, not to exclude Dor. Dor was wonderful, really quite special in her own right, sensible and clear-headed and capable of keeping the house nicely when she tried, although he did worry somewhat about her crankiness, because a child didn't need a cranky mom, a child needed to be built up. Mother had built him up. That was how he had become what he was today. Even the time he had fed glue to Scout, Mother had built him up, by praising his excellent scientific curiosity. He



"Years ago, there was only one Santa Claus. Now, because of genetic engineering, there can be lots of them."

wanted that sort of positive environment for his child, and would have to help Dor with her crankiness, perhaps by calling her to task whenever she was cranky with Baby. An unpleasant duty, to call one's spouse to task, but for Baby, his baby, he would do it, and much, much more.

Oh, it was going to be such fun! God was so good, God was always giving us second chances, all of the clichés were true. God knew us, really knew us, knew the badness within, but still loved us. God had forgiven him, whom must he now forgive? He forgave Dor her crankiness, forgave her for calling him cold and distant the night they had ordered pizza and he had expressed a desire to eat alone on the sleeping porch, forgave Vivian, Dor's mother, for her constant carping about his nightly walks, forgave Gil, Dor's father, for spoiling Dor by giving her laborious foot rubs that she came to expect from him, the deacon—oh, he forgave all of them, it had been a difficult time for everyone, and he forgave himself, for his part in it, and then, and this was hard, he forgave that lost soul in the subdivision beyond the dairy farm, who every night at eleven stood shirtless at her window, lotioning her perfect breasts.

Didn't she realize the temptation she presented? Had she never heard of drapes, hadn't it occurred to her that, though the field was marked "Private Property" and was full of cow manure, a good and decent man immersed in a difficult time might happen to tramp through on a nightly walk he took to try and clear his head, and be led astray?

Oh, he forgave her, he forgave everyone, he was so happy. Dor didn't need to know about any of it, he was a good man. God had proved it by giving him the greatest gift of all, a perfect baby.

Here was the phone, he picked up the phone. On the lounge TV was some kind of joyful parade, like a parade for Christina, which, it occurred to him, was what they would name her, after the risen Christ. She was so cute! She looked something like a cartoon hawk. Her hands had kept opening and closing. Oh, the heck with Mrs. Red, she could wait, the entire church could wait, even Dor could wait, she could probably use the rest, and he hung up the phone and went in search of the nursery, to spend a few precious moments alone with his baby. ♦

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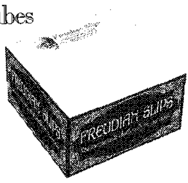

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DEPT. OF CHRISTMAS SPIRITS

SKID-ROW SANTA

BY KEN KESEY

At the finale of the Christmas show last year in Eugene, Oregon, I came out as a skid-row Santa, complete with rubber nose, plastic sack full of beer cans, and a pint of peppermint schnapps to fortify the holiday spirit. I also borrowed my wife Faye's blue egg bucket and labelled it "Homeless." I'd jangle the cans like a bagful of aluminum sleigh bells while I worked the main-floor aisle seats: "Hey, come on, buddy. Put something in the bucket, for Chrissakes. Don't you know it's Christmastime? Hey, that's better. God bless you. You're beautiful."

I ended up with only about seventy-five bucks. Not much of a take for a full house at a Christmas show. But even seventy-five bucks was a wad too big to pocket.

So after I got out of my red suit and rubber snoot I drove off to seek a worthy recipient. I spotted a likely assortment of candidates in the 7-Eleven parking lot, corner of Sixth and Blair. I swung in and held the bucket out the window.

"All right. Who's the hardest-luck case in this lot?"

The candidates looked me over and edged away—all but one guy, ponytailed and slope-shouldered, his chin tucked down in the collar of a canvas camouflage jacket. "I got a streak of hard luck runs all the way back to Jersey," he said. "What about it?"

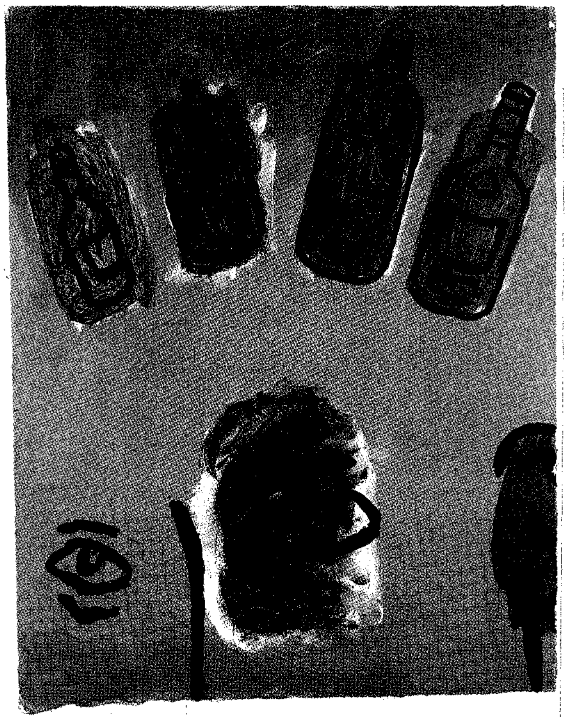
"I'm on a mission from St. Nicholas," I told him. "And if you are, in fact, the least fortunate of the lot"—in the spirit of the season, I refrained from saying "biggest loser"—"then this could be your lucky night."

"Right," he said. "You're some kind of Holy Roller? Where's the string? What's the hustle?"

"No string, no catch, no hustle. I'm giving. You're getting. Get it?"

He did. He took the money and ran, taking Faye's egg bucket into the bargain. The last I saw of him, he was scurrying away, looking for a hole.

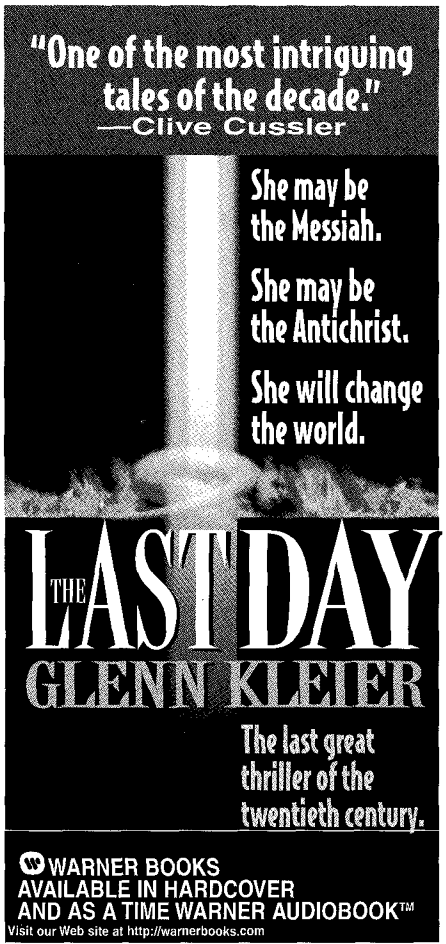
Since then, I've wondered about him. Did that little windfall make any difference? Did he rent a cheap room? Get a bath? A companion? Every time I found myself passing through one of Eugene's hard-luck harbors, I kept half an eye peeled for the sight of a long tail of black hair draggling down the back of a camouflage jacket. Last week, a year later to the day, I made a sighting.



KAREN CALDICOTT

I was in town with Faye and our daughter, getting in some Christmas shopping before we rendezvoused with my mom for supper. We'd done a couple of hours in the malls, and I was shopped out. I announced that I wanted to make some private purchases, and slipped off into the rainy cold—alone. I was headed for the liquor store on Eighth, thinking the spirit could use a little fortification.

But the trusty peppermint wasn't powerful enough. These home-town streets are just too strange, too vacant, too sad. Corner of Sixth at Olive: empty. The great Darigold Creamery that my dad built up from a little Eu-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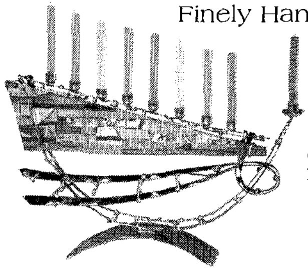

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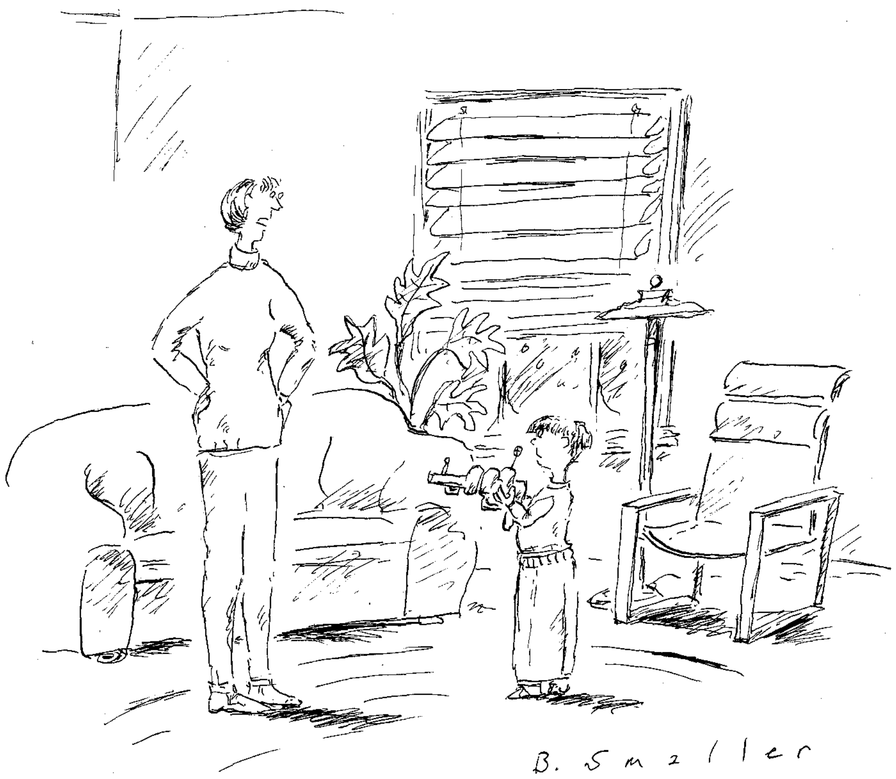


"If you're not a good boy, Santa will bring you only educational toys."

• •

gene farmer's coöperative: bulldozed down. I ducked my head and kept walking in the rain.

The street in my memory was the clearer path anyway: John Warren's Hardware over there, where you could buy blasting powder across the counter; the Corral Novelty Shop, where you could buy itching powder; the Heilig Theatre, with its all-the-way-across-the-street arch, flashing what we all took to be the Norwegian word for "hello," so big it could be read all the way from the windows of the arriving trains: "Heilig, Heilig, Heilig." All gone.

When I reached the city center, I noticed that the thing people had finally given up trying to call a fountain was newly disguised with pine boughs and potted plants. But to no avail. It still looked like the remnants of a bombed-out French cathedral. Then, when the rain eased up, I was surprised to discover that the ruins were not quite deserted: I saw a loose black braid hanging down the back of a camouflage jacket. That seemed right. He was in the old fountain's basin, bent in a concealing crouch at one of the potted pines.

I came up from behind and clapped my hand on his shoulder. "Whatcha doin', Hard Luck? Counting another bucket of money?"

He wheeled around and had my wrist clamped in a bone-breaking grasp before I could finish the word. I saw then that this wasn't a chinless street rat standing down in the basin after all. This was a block-jawed American Indian built like two fireplugs, sitting in a wheelchair.

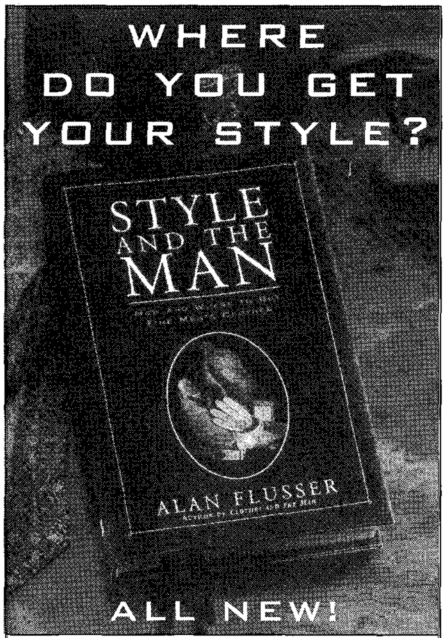
"Ouch! Man! Let go! I thought you were somebody else!"

He eased the hold, but kept the wrist. I told him about last year's longhair and the matching jacket.

He listened, studying my eyes. "O.K. Sorry about the twist. I was taking a leak. You surprised me. Let's get out of the rain and see what kind of medicine you've got sticking out of your pocket."

We retired under some scaffolding. He was less than enthusiastic about my choice of pocket medicine. "I'd rather drink something like Southern Comfort if I have to choose a sugar drink," he said. But we passed the pint back and forth and watched the rain.

He leaned to spit and a folded Army blanket slipped out of his lap. His legs



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were as gone as the main gut of my poor home town.

He was a part-time fillet man from the Pike Place Market, up in Seattle, on his way to spend Christmas with family on "the res," outside of Albuquerque. His bus was laid up for a couple of hours: "I think they're getting the Greyhound spayed before she gets to California."

When the pint was about three-quarters gone, I screwed on the lid and held it out. "I gotta meet the women. Go ahead and keep it."

"Ah, I guess not," he said.

"You're pretty choosy for a thirsty man, aren't you? What would be your best druthers?"

"To have the money and make my own choice."

I reached for my wallet. "I think I got a couple of bucks."

"And a quarter? If I had two bucks and a quarter, I could get a pint of Ten High. With four and change I'd go on to a fair-to-middlin' fifth. Cream of Kentucky."

I hesitated. Was I being hustled? "O.K. Let's see what we've got." I emptied the wallet and pockets onto his blanket. He added a few coins and counted the collection.

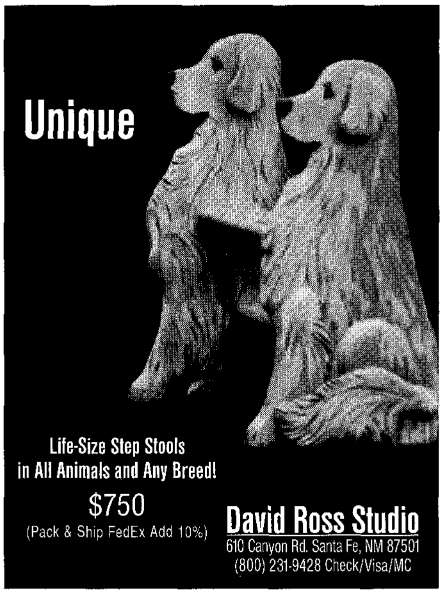
"Nine seventy-five. If I come up with another two dollars, I can get a bottle of Bushmill's Irish. Think I can panhandle two dollars between here and the liquor store?"

"Without a doubt," I assured him. "With both panhandles tied behind your back."

We shook hands goodbye and headed off in our separate directions, strolling and rolling through the rain. At the restaurant, my mother wanted to know what I was thinking about that gave me such a goofy grin.

"I was just thinking, if beggars can't be choosers, then it must follow that choosers, by definition, are not beggars."

This year for the Christmas show, Santa's got himself a classier outfit and wrangled some holiday helpers out of the high-school choir, God bless 'em. And we're gonna work all the aisles. Come on out here you helpers, come on out. Get down there and panhandle! And you guys in the audience start passing your money to the aisles here. This is no time to nickel-and-dime, for Chrissakes! It's Christmastime. ◆



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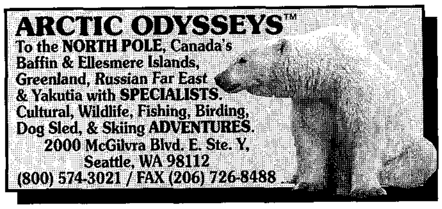

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A GENETIC HISTORY OF MY GRANDPARENTS

A good-looking boy and a good-looking girl alone on top of a mountain—what do you expect?

BY JEFFREY EUGENIDES

In the late summer of 1922, my grandmother Desdemona Tatakis was in her silkworm cocoonery, high on the slopes of Mt. Olympus, when her heart, without warning, missed a beat: she felt it stop and squeeze into a ball. Then, as she stiffened, it began to race, thumping against her ribs. She let out a small, astonished cry. Her five thousand silkworms, ever sensitive to human emotion, had stopped spinning. My grandmother, squinting in the dim light, looked down to see the front of her tunic visibly fluttering, and in that instant, as she recognized the insurrection inside her, Desdemona became what she would be for the rest of her life: a sick person imprisoned in the body of a healthy one. Unable to believe in her own endurance, however, she stepped outside to take a last look at the world that, as it turned out, she wouldn't be leaving for another sixty-seven years.

The view was terrific. Two thousand feet below lay the old Ottoman capital of Bursa: it looked like a backgammon board spread out across the valley's green felt, with diamonds of red roof tile within diamonds of whitewash, and the sultans' tombs stacked up like bright chips. Back in 1922, automobile traffic didn't clog Inönü Avenue. Chairlifts didn't cut swaths into Mt. Olympus's pine forests. Grimy metallurgic and textile plants didn't ring the city. Bursa looked—at least from two thousand feet—as it had for the past six centuries: a holy city, necropolis of the Ottomans and center of the silk trade, its quiet, declining streets abloom with minarets and cypress trees.

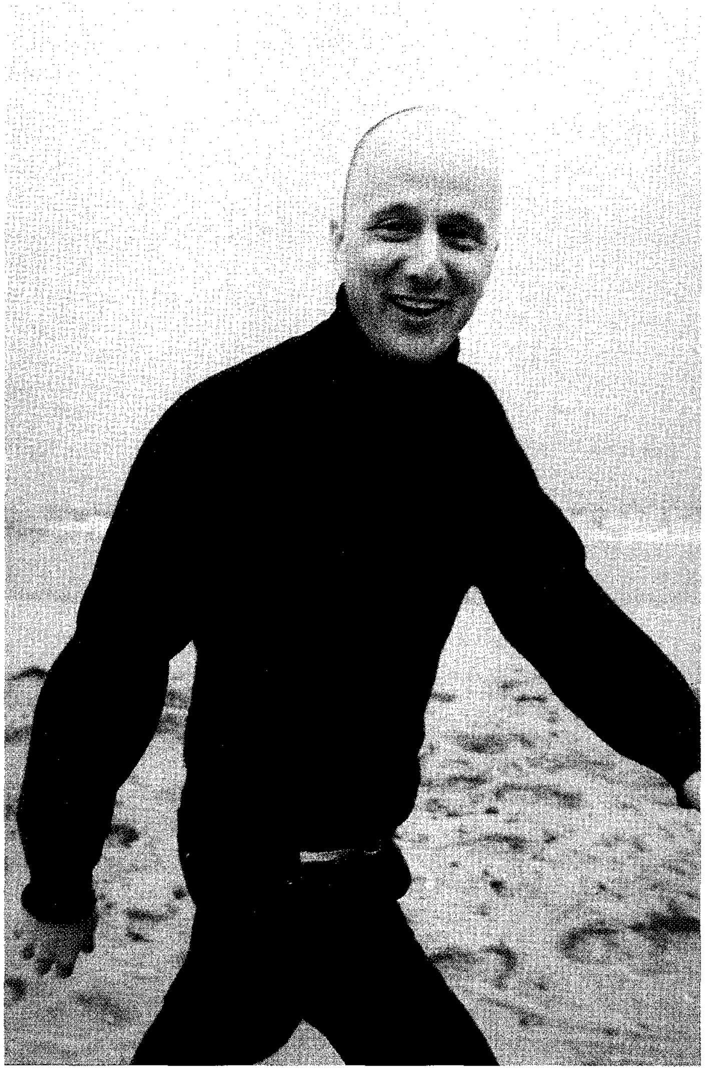
To diagnose my grandmother's heart palpitations: they were psychosomatic symptoms of grief. Her parents were dead—killed in the war with the Turks. The Greek Army, encouraged by Britain and France and the other Allied nations, had invaded western Turkey in 1919, reclaiming the ancient Greek territory of Asia Minor. After years of fearing a massacre, the people of Dermidas, my grandmother's village, had emerged from hiding on the mountain into the safety of the Megala Idea—the dream of Greater Greece. It was now Greek troops that occupied Bursa, and a Greek flag that flew over the former Ottoman palace. The Turks and their leader, Mustafa Kemal, had retreated to the east. For the first time in their lives, the Greeks of Turkey were out from under Turkish rule, no longer giaours ("infidel dogs"), no longer forbidden to wear bright clothing or to ride horses or use saddles. No Turkish official would be arriving in the villages to inspect the year's crop of young boys, carting off the strongest, the most well-muscled, to serve in the Janissaries. Now, when the village men took silk to market in Bursa, they were free Greeks, in a free Greek city. But Desdemona, parentless, still felt imprisoned by the past. And so she stood on the mountain, looking down at the emancipated city, and felt cheated by her inability to feel happy, like everybody else.

For the greater part of an hour, Desdemona had been trying to ignore her counter-intuitive reactions by working in the cocoonery. She'd come out the back door of the house, through the sweet-smelling grape arbor, and across the terraced yard into the low, thatch-roofed hut. The silkworm cocoonery was my grandmother's own personal, reeking oasis. The acrid, larval smell inside didn't bother her. All around, soft white silkworms clung to bundled mulberry twigs. Desdemona watched them spinning cocoons, moving their heads as though to music. She forgot about the world outside, its changes and convulsions, its terrible new music (which is about to be sung in a moment). Instead, she heard her mother's voice—Euphrosyne Tatakis speaking in this very cocoonery years ago, elucidating the mysteries of silkworms. "To have good silk, you have to be pure," she used to tell her daughter. "The silkworms know everything. You can always tell what somebody is up to by the way their silk looks," and so on, Euphrosyne giving examples: "Helen Simotas, who's always lifting her skirt for everyone? Have you seen her cocoons? Each one has a stain on it, for every man. You should look next time." Desdemona still couldn't entirely disbelieve her mother's morality tales, and (because of the dreams she'd been having) examined the cocoon constellations for signs of her own impurity. She looked for other things, too, because her mother also maintained that silkworms reacted to historical atrocities. After every massacre, even in a village fifty miles away, the silkworms' filaments had turned the color of blood—"I've seen them bleed like the feet of Christos himself," her mother again—and Desdemona, years later, remembering, checked to see if any cocoons had turned red. She picked up a tray and shook it; she picked up another, and it was then that she felt her heart stop, squeeze into a ball, and begin punching her from inside. She dropped the tray, saw her tunic flutter from interior force, and understood that her heart operated on its own instructions.

So my *yia yia* stood looking down at Bursa, hoping to spot a visible confirmation of her invisible dread. And then, from inside the house, it came, but not a sight, a sound: her brother, Eleutherios, had begun to sing. In badly pronounced, meaningless English.

"Ev'ry morning, ev'ry evening, ain't we got fun," Eleutherios sang, standing before the bedroom mirror as he did every afternoon about this time, fastening the new celluloid collar to the new white shirt, squeezing a dollop of hair pomade (smelling of limes) into his palm and rubbing it into his new Rudy Vallee haircut. "In the mean-time, in between-time, ain't we got fun." The song meant nothing to him, but the melody was enough. It spoke of jazz-age frivolity, gin highballs, cigarette girls; it made him slick his hair back with panache (while for Desdemona the song meant only *that music Eleutherios picks up down in the city, that American music . . .*) as he put on his new striped suit and folded the red pocket handkerchief that matched the necktie he'd just learned to tie; and Desdemona felt funny inside, especially her stomach, which was roiled by complicated emotions—sadness, anger, and something she couldn't name, which hurt most of all. "The rent's unpaid, dear, we haven't a car," Eleutherios crooned, but Desdemona now heard her mother, her last words, spoken just before she died from a Turkish soldier's bullet: "Take care of Eleutherios. Promise me. Find him a wife!" and Desdemona, through her tears, replying, "I promise. I promise." These voices were all still speaking at once in Desdemona's head as she crossed the yard to go into the house. She came through the small kitchen, where she had dinner cooking (for one), and marched straight into the bedroom she shared with her brother. He was still singing ("Not much money, Oh! but honey"), fixing his cufflinks, parting his hair, then looking up ("Ain't we got") and seeing his sister ("fun") fell silent.

For a minute, the mirror held their two faces. Eleutherios was a year younger than Desdemona, and she often wondered how she had survived the first twelve months without him. For as long as she could remember, he'd always been right beside her, in the bed they shared as children, pressing his bare foot to the Orthodox cross nailed to the headboard; and later on, in his own bed, only a kilim away. At night, in the dark, he improvised songs for her, or made up rhymes, and one of the reasons she hated his new American music was that he sang it only to himself in the mirror. Desdemona loved her brother as only a sister growing up on a mountain could love a brother: he was the whole entertainment, her best friend and confidant, her co-discoverer of secret paths and hideaways. The emotional sympathy she shared with Eleutherios had been so absolute that she sometimes forgot they were separate people. She was so accustomed to their Siamese shadow springing up against the whitewashed house at evening that when she encountered her solitary shadow it seemed cut in half. When adolescence came and, with it, her black depressions, she felt for the first time that she was different from her brother, weaker but more discerning, less dependable but more complex.



"Let's not forget where they were dancing, in Dermidas, where cousins married cousins and uncles sometimes married nieces." The author, photographed by Max Vadukul.

Peacetime seemed to be changing everything. In the last month Eleutherios had gone down to Bursa a total of seventeen times. On three occasions he'd stayed overnight at the Cocoon Inn, across from the Orhan Gazi Mosque. He'd left one morning dressed in boots, kneesocks, breeches, doulamas, and vest, and he came back the following evening in the striped suit, with a silk scarf tucked into his collar, like an opera singer, and a black derby on his head. He'd begun to teach himself French from a small plum-colored phrase book; he'd picked up new, adult-like gestures, putting his hands in his pockets and rattling change, for instance, or doffing his cap. When she did the laundry, Desdemona found crumpled notes in Eleutherios's pockets, scraps covered with figures being added and subtracted.

My grandmother, whose constitutional thunderclouds had broken out into full-fledged cardiac thunder, looked at her brother as she had once looked at her own shadow, and felt that something was missing.

"And where are you going tonight all dressed up?"

"I'm going down to the Koza Han. To sell cocoons."

"Again? You went yesterday."

Eleutherios ran a comb through his hair, parting it on the right side. "It's the season."

Desdemona came closer. She picked up his hair pomade, sniffed it, and made a face. "What do you want down there?"

"Me? Nothing."

She examined her brother closely and held out her fist. Automatically, still looking in the mirror, Eleutherios made a fist, too. They counted, "One, two, three . . ."

"Rock crushes lizard, I win," Desdemona said. "So tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me what's so interesting about Bursa."

Eleutherios combed his hair forward, back again, and parted it on the left. He examined the change, swivelling his head. "Which do you like better? Left or right?"

"Let me see." Desdemona leaned back to make her appraisal. She raised her hand delicately to Eleutherios's hair—and mussed it.

"Hey!"

"What do you want down in Bursa?"

"Leave me alone."

"Tell me!"

"What do I want?" Eleutherios said, finally exasperated. "What do you think I want?" He turned to face her. "I want a woman."

Desdemona gripped her belly, patted her heart. She took two steps backward and examined her brother anew. The idea that Eleutherios, who shared her eyes and eyebrows, who slept in the bed beside hers, whose *poulaki* she'd seen so often it *was* like a little bird to her, the idea that this brother (and that *poulaki*) could be possessed by such a desire—this had never occurred to Desdemona.

It made her angry. Also, I suspect, a little jealous. Hadn't she made a nice home for Eleutherios? Didn't she cook his food? And sew his clothes? And take care of him when he was sick? And if he had to be filthy-minded what was wrong with the village girls? Was he so shameful that he had to go down to the city, where the women were all concubines and harem girls? She knew, she'd heard stories; their own father had gone there. "They've got two hundred women for one man, those people," he said. "And the man, the Sultan? He's just a little *malaka* who takes baths all day." Was that what Eleutherios wanted? Perfumed harlots? Strumpets who did all kinds of nasty business—she didn't even want to think—"With this one, with that one, with animals even, yes, it's true! Down there, as long as someone is paying, the women don't care who puts what in wherever. What? Am I embarrassing you? But I'm only talking the way Turkish girls do. I'm getting you ready for your new bride."

So, in my imagination, did Desdemona hold forth. "What is wrong with a nice Greek girl? Eh? You have to have some *boutana* with veils? Let me tell you something. Do you know why those Turkish women cover their faces? Because no one can stand to look at them! Yes! Ba told me so himself. So listen, Eleutherios, stay where you are. Marry one of your own kind."

It was at this point that Eleutherios, who continued recombing his hair throughout the tirade, called his sister's attention to something she was overlooking. "Des," he said, "there aren't any girls in this village."

Which was pretty much the case. At that time, the population of Dermidas numbered only fifty-seven, slightly less than half of whom were women. Of twenty-seven females, ten were middle-aged wives. Eight were osteoporotic widows. Three were young mothers, each with a daughter in diapers. One was his sister. That left two marriageable girls. Whom Desdemona now rushed to nominate.

"What about Lucille Kafkalis? She's a nice girl. Or Victoria Pappas?"

"Lucille smells," said Eleutherios. "And Victoria has a mustache bigger than mine. Please. I don't want to share my razor with my wife." With that, he put down his comb. "Don't wait up," he said, and left the bedroom.

Eleutherios was gone. His footsteps faded away. Desdemona's heart fluttered once, but she paid no attention. "I don't like eating alone!" she shouted, to no one.

The wind from the valley had picked up, as it did every afternoon. It blew through the open windows, rattling their two cups, two plates, two everything. It rattled the latch on Desdemona's hope chest. Desdemona picked up the worry beads that were lying on top and slipped them through her fingers one by one, exactly as her mother had done, and her mother before her, and her mother before her, performing a family practice of precise, codified, thorough worrying. As the beads clicked together on their string, Desdemona gave herself up to them. Eleu's new suit—who cleaned it? Me! And how did he buy the suit? With my cocoons! Desdemona, with her loose, dark hair, her sad eyes, her face of a girl forced to grow up too fast, worried with her beads, as had all the Tatakis women before her. But she was no longer counting her pains. Instead, the beads now summoned to her mind images in a magazine hidden in the rafters over her head. One bead was a hair style. The next bead was a silk slip. The next was a black brassiere. My grandmother, you see, had begun to matchmake.

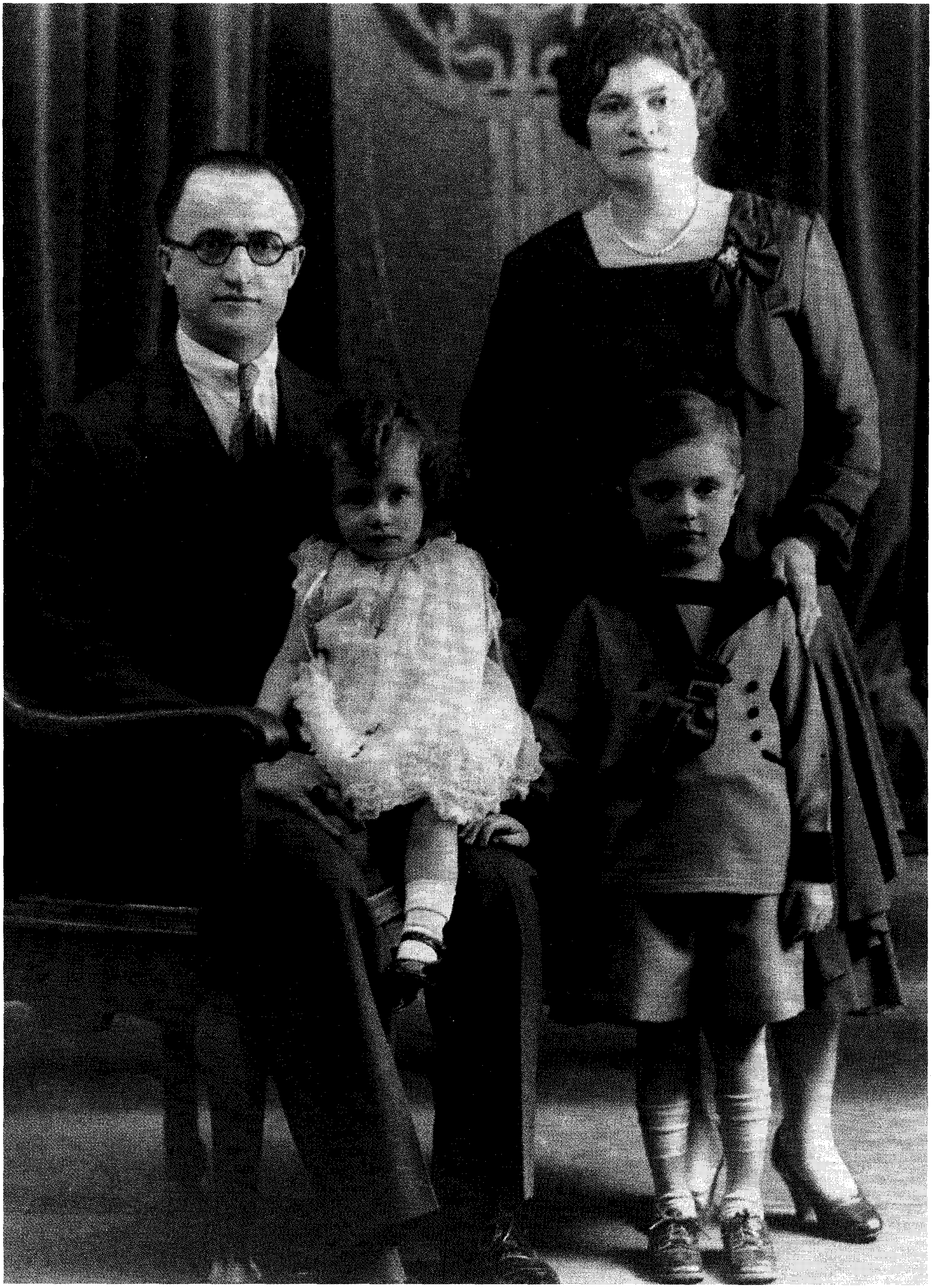
It wasn't a matter of finding the right girl. It was a matter of creating her. The next morning, Desdemona went to inspect her raw materials. Lucille Kafkalis and Victoria Pappas lived next to each other, which, according to the layout of Dermidas, meant on top of each other. Desdemona called the two girls out. At first sight, Desdemona admitted that Eleutherios hadn't been exaggerating. Above Victoria Pappas's upper lip was a luxuriant mustache. And Lucille Kafkalis, plump and serene, not too bright, was feeding a carrot to her goat: as Desdemona approached, Lucille held the half-eaten carrot out, as though offering it. The goat, involved in its own mating strategies, lowered its head and urinated into its own face.

Desdemona took the first steps. She gave Lucille a bottle of perfume and showed her the seven places where her pulse would spread the aroma: behind each ear, at each jugular, behind the wrists and knees. In the courtyard of the Pappas house, she sat Victoria on a stool and spread a thick syrup on her chin and sideburns.

Eleutherios, meanwhile, carrying a sack of cocoons, had reached the city. He crossed the tram tracks, came down Cumhuriyet Caddesi, and walked into the caravansary's open courtyard. Inside, around the aquamarine fountain, silkworm cocoons rose like a heap of marshmallows. Cocoons pyramiding in merchant stalls. Cocoons foaming from baskets on the backs of small boys. Cocoons tipping brass scales. Cocoons being handled, sniffed, and held up to the soft evening light. Eleutherios squeezed through the narrow path that had been shovelled through the cascading cocoons, ducking porters, sidestepping carts and tea trays, until, at a stall that was just closing up, he found his man, opened his sack, and presented his five cocoons. "I was coming into town, so I brought these." The merchant,

The author's paternal grandparents, George and Victoria Eugenides, with their children, in Detroit, around 1930. The couple's marriage was arranged in a small town near Mt. Olympus, in Turkey, before the war broke out between the Greeks and the Turks in 1919. Unlike Desdemona and Eleutherios, the couple were not related.

COURTESY EUGENIDES HELLENISTIC ARCHIVE



shaking his head, paid him, and then Eleutherios retreated through the aisles and left the courtyard to do what he had really come for.

Watch closely: Eleutherios, dressed for the city, derby at a rakish angle, walks down the sloping streets of Bursa and passes a coffee kiosk but doesn't go in. The proprietor hails him, but Eleutherios only waves and keeps going. He passes a window behind whose shutters a woman's voice calls, but he pays no attention. He passes fruit sellers and restaurants, until he reaches another street where—Desdemona could never have guessed—he enters a church. More precisely, a former mosque, its minaret torn down and its Koranic inscriptions recently plastered over to provide a fresh canvas for the Christian saints that are, even now, being painted on it. Eleutherios hands a coin to the old lady selling candles, lights one, and stands it upright in sand. He takes a seat in a back pew. His prayer begins in the usual way, with the words he learned as a child—*Kyrie eleison, Kyrie eleison, Kyrie eleison, I am not worthy to come before thy throne.* But he soon veers off: *I don't know why I feel like this, it's not natural.* . . . And then he turns a little accusatory— *You made me this way, I didn't ask to think things like*— and, finally, becomes abject, praying, *Give me strength, Christos, don't let me be like this, if she even knew* . . . eyes squeezed shut, hands bending the derby's brim, the words drifting up with the incense toward a Christ who scrutinizes him with one eye.

He prayed for five minutes. Then he came out, replaced his hat on his head, and rattled the change in his pockets. He climbed back up the sloping streets and, this time (his heart unburdened), stopped at all the places he'd resisted on his way down. He stepped into a kiosk for coffee and a smoke (he was trying out cigarettes). He went to a café for a glass of ouzo. The backgammon players shouted, "Ela! Valentino!" He let himself get cajoled into playing, just one game, then lost and had to go double or nothing. (The runic calculations Desdemona had found in Eleutherios's pants pockets were gambling debts.) The night wore on. The ouzo kept flowing, and by midnight Eleutherios had come back out into the streets, searching for shutters behind which a voice had called.

A door opens. A face smiles, an arm beckons, chiming bracelets. Eleutherios, sharing a sofa with three Greek soldiers, looks across an overstuffed parlor at seven plump, perfumed women (phonograph playing "Ev'ry morning, ev'ry evening . . ."); and, as the madam says "Anyone you like," his eyes pass over the blond, blue-eyed Circassian, and the Armenian girl suggestively eating an incomparable Bursa peach, and the Mongolian with the blunt bangs, to fix on a peasant girl at the end of the far couch, a sad-eyed girl with perfect skin and black hair spilling from her kerchief. ("There's a scabbard for every dagger," the madam says, in Turkish, as the whores laugh.) Eleutherios doesn't yet understand why he's so attracted to her. He stands, smooths his jacket, holds out his hand toward his choice, and it's only as they reach the room, with its unclean sheets, its blood-colored oil lamp, its smell of incense and dirty feet, that he begins to notice the similarities—the large breasts and the slim waist, the soft dimpling of flesh over the knees, the hair cascading down to the defenseless coccyx—even though he later won't hear the name he cries out at the climax of his transports, or even the whore's response: "I'm Irini. Desdemona's the girl down the hall."

In the morning, Eleutherios, guilty and depressed, left the city and climbed back up the mountain to Dermidas. His pockets (empty) made no sound. Hungover and feverish, he told himself that his sister was right: it was time for him to get married. He would marry Lucille, or Victoria. He would have children and stop going down to Bursa. He'd change. He nodded his head; he fixed his hat.

WHILE just above, on Mt. Olympus, Desdemona was giving her two beginners finishing lessons. She taught the girls every artifice she'd learned from the only beauty magazine in her possession, a tattered catalogue called *Lingerie Parisienne*, which first her father and now Desdemona herself kept hidden in the rafters—thirty-two pages of French models wearing brassieres, corsets, and garter belts. Her father used to pore over it at night, thinking everyone was asleep. Now, when Eleutherios was sleeping, Desdemona pored over the catalogue, memorizing the pictures so that she could re-create them the next day.

She instructed Lucille and Victoria to stop by every afternoon. The girls arrived under flimsy pretexts (they'd run out of olive oil, feta, coffee). They wore a different dress each time. They also changed their hair styles, walks, and jewelry. The two drab girls multiplied themselves into a small city of women, each with a signature laugh, a personal gemstone, a favorite song hummed as she floated around the house, appearing and disappearing at the doorway. After two weeks, Desdemona went out to the arbor in the afternoon and found Eleutherios neglecting his French. He had a blank look on his face. "What are you still doing here? Get going. Go down to Bursa. I'll pack some food for you. Go find a Turkish wife. But be sure to look under her mask in case she has a mustache like Victoria's."

"Funny you should mention that," Eleutherios said. "Have you noticed? Vicky doesn't have a mustache anymore. I don't know what happened. And do you know what else?" he added, getting up now, smiling. "Even Lucille's starting to smell O.K. Every time she comes over, I smell flowers." He came up close to Desdemona. "You were right," he said. "The most beautiful girls in the world are right here in this village."

She looked up into his eyes. "You think so?"

"Sometimes you don't even notice what's right under your nose."

They stood looking at each other, as Desdemona's stomach began to feel funny again, way deep down. And to explain the sensation I have to tell you another story. In his presidential address at the annual convention of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex in 1980 (held that year in Mazatlán with lots of suggestive piñatas), Dr. Peter Luce lectured on the sexological concept of limerence, coined by D. Tennov, in 1979. The word itself means nothing; Tennov made it up to avoid any etymological associations. The state of limerence, however, is well known. It denotes that first fever of human pair-bonding. It causes giddiness, elation, an inner tickling of the chest wall, an urge to climb a balcony on the ladder of the beloved's hair. Limerence is that initial drugged and happy bedtime, when you sniff your lover like a scented poppy for hours running. (It lasts, Luce explained, an average of two years, tops.) And so, contrary to what Miss Theodakis taught us in

Greek school—that love is always savage and transformative; for instance, what happened to Europa with that bull—and in keeping with the methodology of the clinic, I'll define what Desdemona felt that day as the stirrings of limerence. Let the word mean just that; let it refer to a spurt of sex hormones, rather than to Eros's shaft. Still, I have to insist: to Desdemona it felt like a lake of warmth flooding up from her abdomen and across her chest. It spread like the hundred-and-eighty-proof, fiery diaspora of a mint-green Finnish liqueur. With the pumping of two efficient glands in her neck, it heated her face. And then the warmth got other ideas and started spreading into places that a girl like Desdemona didn't allow it to go, and she broke off the stare and turned away. She walked to the window, leaving the limerence behind, and the breeze from the valley cooled her down. "I will speak to the girls' parents," she said (an old phrase in a young voice). "Then you must go pay court."

THE next night, the moon, like the country's fallen flag, was a crescent. Down in Bursa, the Greek troops scrounged for food, caroused, and shot up another mosque. In Angora, in the east, Mustafa Kemal informed the newspapers that he would be having tea at a villa in Chankaya, while in actuality he'd left for his headquarters in the field. Under cover of night, his Turkish troops moved not north toward Eskişehir, where everyone expected the Turkish counterattack, but to the heavily fortified city of Afyon, in the south. (At Eskişehir, the few Turkish troops that were there lit campfires to exaggerate their strength.) And, amid these deployments, Eleutherios Tatakis, bearing two corsages, stepped out the front door of his house, grasped the rope bannister, and began his descent to where Victoria Pappas lived.

It was an event on the level of a birth or a death. Each of the fifty-seven people of Dermidas had heard about Eleutherios's upcoming visits, and the old widows, the married women, the young mothers, as well as the old men, were waiting to see which girl he would choose.

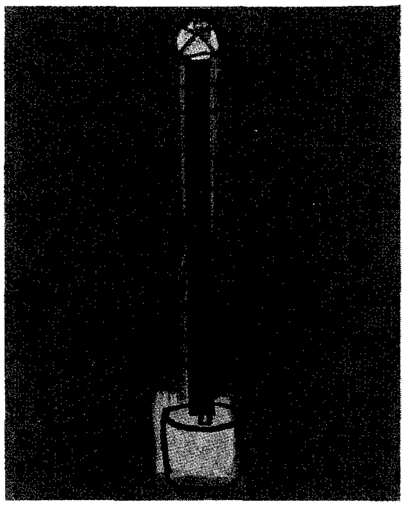
Victoria Pappas stood half in and half out of the light, the shading across her body exactly that of the photograph

KAREN CALDICOTT

DEPT. OF CHRISTMAS CHEER

CHOP-SUEY XMAS

OY. The holidays with our two-year-old boy. Despite our anti-ceremonialist leanings, it is time to do something commemorative at home. There is, after all, a possibility that, at two, he will remember this as his first "holiday season." (At a theological loss, we have adopted the retail phrase.)



Performance anxiety pervades the household. We have to do all the holidays if we do any. Hanukkah for my husband, Kwanzaa for my son, who is adopted and part African-American, and, of course, Christmas (I think in my Gentile-centric way) for everyone. Our family is an improvisation, a desperate rendition of "Gilligan's Island."

"Do we have to do Kwanzaa? It's really just an invention," my husband says. "It's artificial."

"Unlike Santa Claus, who is so natural? Practically organic, practically vegan—coming down a chimney like that!"

I own a book on Kwanzaa. I've opened it, spotted a lot of illustrations of craft items to make at home, then shut it in a sweat. I need more help with this. I cannot even see the words "needlepoint wall hanging" without feeling inadequate and faint. My husband's holiday indifference now seems like laziness. He hasn't a clue when Hanukkah begins this year. He cannot say what a Maccabee even is.

I find myself saying loudly, "Why does the shiksa have to get out the menorah every year? Why does the shiksa always have to light the candles? Why must the shiksa be the one to teach your child the dreidel song?"

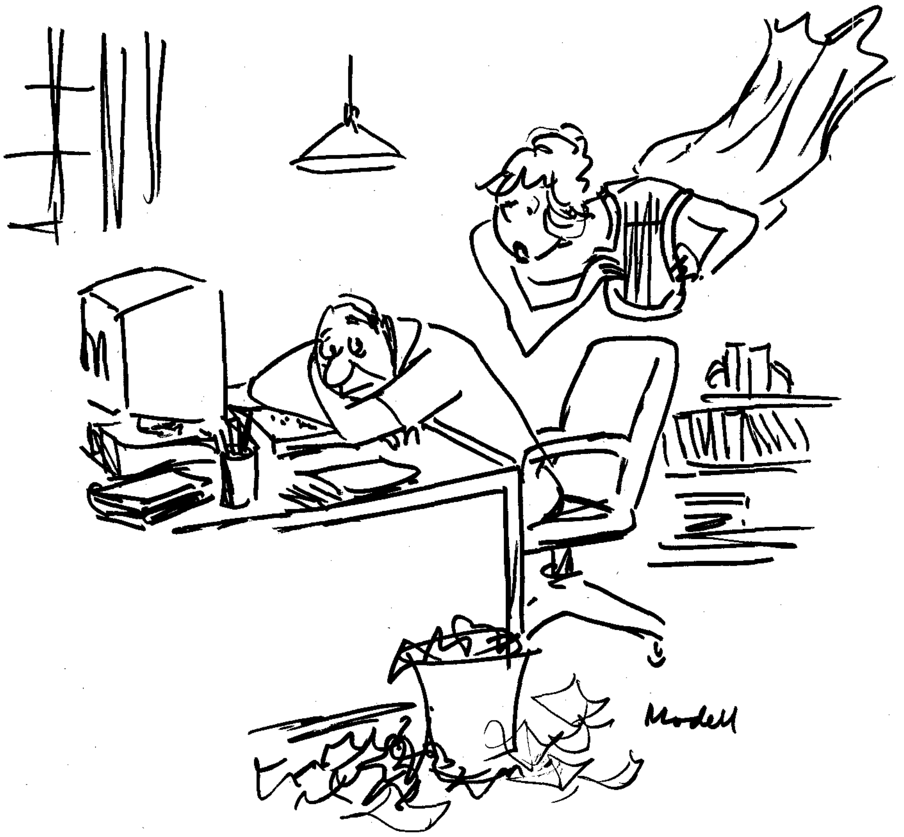
All our two-year-old wants out of the holidays is gum. He spotted some once in the mouth of a babysitter, and since then he has staged his own toddler version of a radio pledge drive. *Gum, gum, gum!* He studies my mouth for telltale movements—ironic moues and snaps, chompings and pursings. If I bite my tongue, or if I have my marital tongue in my (marital) cheek, he says hopefully, "Mommy, what's in your mouth? You have gum?" He is on the lookout for deviously disguised cud.

This year—it's 1996—we get a slightly dehydrated Christmas tree, park it close to a radiator, and decorate it in a crazed, slapdash way (tinfoil, string, and Christmas cards). Next morning, all the needles drop—in a long, continuous *whoosh* that sounds like rain. The tree now resembles a giant TV antenna—one littered with debris from a windstorm.

On Christmas Eve, we build a fire, then snuff it out with an old wet towel, realizing, fearfully, that we haven't cleaned the flue in five years. Then the boiler breaks down. We plug in the space heaters. We order takeout Chinese. Only then, when almost all is lost and I am feeling so unexpectedly sad, do I realize what a sucker I am for the beautiful fake Christmas that German-American commerce concocted for us years ago. A boon for the economy and a pernicious sweet for the mind. But it moves me. My heart is a chump. I actually *like* the shopping, the gift wrap, the carols—even the tinkling store music. I like the invented holiday miracles, the unexpected kindnesses and transformations—at least, as they are portrayed on the TV specials! And, looking out the window and seeing only sleet, I realize that I even like the snow. Where, now, is that lovely perfect Christmas? On whose open fire are those goddam chestnuts roasting? I have a fiction writer's weakness for fiction. It's an occupational hazard. A business thing.

"Well," I say, spooning out chop suey. Can I spoon out cheer as well? "Merry Christmas, you guys! Merry, merry Christmas!"

Our two-year-old is watching my lips and jaw. His eyebrows lift, and his eyes grow knowing and bright. "Mommy?" he says. "You have gum?"—LORRIE MOORE



"Hold on. I'm going to have to call for backup."

• •

on page 8 of *Lingerie Parisienne*. Desdemona (costume lady, stage manager, and director, all in one) had pinned up Victoria's hair, letting ringlets fall over her forehead and warning her to keep her biggish nose in shadow. Perfumed, depilated, moist with emollients, wearing kohl around her eyes, Victoria let Eleutherios look upon her. She felt the heat of his gaze. She heard his heavy breathing, the small squeaks from his dry throat as he tried to speak, and then the sounds of his feet coming toward her, and she turned, smiling as Desdemona had taught her to do. But she was so distracted by the effort to plump her lower lip into a raspberry while leaving a sliver of teeth exposed and dimpling her cheeks that she didn't realize the footsteps weren't approaching but retreating; and she turned to see that Eleutherios Tatakis, the only eligible bachelor in town, had taken off.

While back at home Desdemona opened her hope chest with the Victorian lady painted on the lid. She reached in and pulled out her corset. Her mother had given it to her years ago, in expectation of her wedding night, saying, "I hope you fill this out someday." Desdemona held the strange, complicated garment against her in front of the mirror. Down went her kneesocks, her gray underwear. Down went her high-waisted skirt, her drab, high-collared tunic. She shook off her kerchief so that her dark hair fell over her bare shoulders. The corset was made of white silk. As she put it on, Desdemona felt as though she were spinning in her own cocoon, awaiting metamorphosis.

But when she looked in the mirror she caught herself. It was no use. She would never get married. Eleutherios would come back tonight having made his choice of bride, and then he would move in with her, would build a new house, another cell in the hive. She would stay where she was, clicking her beads and growing even older than she already felt. A dog howled. Someone in the village kicked over a bundle of sticks and cursed. And Desdemona wept silently because she was going to spend the rest of her days counting worries that never went away.

In the meantime, Lucille Kafkalis was standing exactly as she'd been told, half in and half out of the light, wearing a white hat sashed with glass cherries, a mantilla over bare shoulders, a bright-green décolleté dress, and high heels, in which she didn't move for fear of falling. Her fat mother waddled in, grinning and shouting, "Ela! Here he comes! Even one minute he couldn't stay with Victoria!"

But already Eleutherios could smell the goat, despite the perfume. He had just entered the low doorway of the Kafkalis house. Lucille's father welcomed him, giving him a double *abrazo*, and then said, "We'll leave you two alone. To get acquainted." The parents left. It was dim in the room. Eleutherios turned . . . and dropped another corsage.

While Desdemona, weeping, takes off her corset, folds it back up, and returns it to the hope chest. She throws herself on Eleutherios's bed to continue crying. The pillow smells of his lime pomade and she breathes it in, crying and sobbing, until, drugged by weeping's opiates, she falls asleep. She dreams the dream she's been having lately. In the dream everything's the way it used to be. She and Eleutherios are children again (except they have adult bodies). They're lying in the same bed (except it's their parents' bed). They shift their limbs in sleep (except it feels extremely nice, how they shift, and the bed is wet) . . . at which point Desdemona wakes up. Her face is hot. Her stomach feels funny, way way down, and she can almost name the feeling now.

As I sit here, thinking E. O. Wilson thoughts. For instance, was it love or reproduction? Chance or destiny? Crime or nature at work? Maybe the gene that Desdemona and Eleutherios shared, the Tatakis gene, contained an override, insuring its expression against all taboo, which would explain Desdemona's tears and Eleutherios's taste in prostitutes. It wasn't fondness, not even admiration, but only a need that neither of them understood for this new thing to enter the world. It's the heart's rigged game. And also: why do I see these things? Is my photographic genetic memory inherited, too? Because I can see everything—Desdemona's shining cheeks, for instance, and the grapes outside vibrating as ominously as mood music—and I even feel a little choked up myself, as you would, too, if you could witness the contingencies of your own existence falling into place; but I can't explain this business of falling in love, no more than Desdemona or Eleutherios could have, no more than any of us can; I can't separate the hormonal from what feels divine, and maybe I cling to the God stuff out of some altruism hardwired to preserve the species; I can't say. I try to go back in my mind, to a time before genetics, before everyone was in the habit of saying about everything, "It's in the genes." A time before our present freedom, and so much freer! Desdemona had no idea what was happening. She didn't envision her insides as a vast computer code, all ones and zeros, an infinity of sequences, any one of which might contain a bug. Now we know we carry this map of ourselves around. Even as we stand on a street corner, it dictates our destiny. It brings onto our faces the same wrinkles and age spots our parents had. It makes us sniff in idiosyncratic, recognizable family ways. Genes embedded so deep they control our eye muscles, so that two sisters have the same way of blinking, and twin boys tend to dribble in unison. I feel myself sometimes, in anxious moods, playing with the cartilage of my nose exactly as my brothers Theo and Nicholas do. Our lungs, formed from the same instructions, press air out in similar tones and decibels. And this can be extrapolated backward in time, so that when I speak Desdemona speaks, too. She's writing these words now. Desdemona, who had no idea of the army inside her, carrying out its million orders, or of the one soldier who disobeyed, going AWOL . . .

. . . Running like Eleutherios away from Lucille Kafkalis and back to his sister. Desdemona heard his feet hurrying up the steps and put a smile on as he came through the door.

"So, which one did you choose?"

Eleutherios, inspecting his sister, said nothing. He hadn't shared a bedroom with her all his life not to be able to tell when she'd been crying. Her hair was down, covering most of her face, but the eyes that looked up at him were as familiar as his own. "Neither," he said.

At that, Desdemona felt tremendous happiness. But she said, "Shame on you. You have to choose."

"Those girls look like a couple of Turkish whores."

"Eleutherios!"

"It's true."

"You don't want to marry them?"

"No."

"You have to." She held out her fist. "If I win, you marry Lucille." Eleutherios, who could never resist a bet, made a fist himself. "One, two, three . . ."

"Axe breaks rock," Eleutherios said. "I win."

"Again," said Desdemona. "If I win, you marry Vicky. One, two, three . . ."

"Lizard eats axe. I win again! Goodbye to Vicky."

"Then who will you marry?"

"I don't know," he said, taking her hands and looking down at her. "How about you?"

"Too bad I'm your sister."

"You're not only my sister. You're my second cousin, too. Second cousins can marry."

"You're crazy, Eleutherios."

"This way will be easier. I won't have to move out my things."

Joking but not joking, letting the words come out into the open under the pretense that they weren't being serious, Desdemona and Eleutherios embraced. At first, they just hugged in the standard way, but after ten seconds the hug began to change; certain positions of the hands and strokings of the fingers weren't the usual displays of sibling affection, and these things constituted a language of their own, announced a whole new message silently in the dark yard. Eleutherios began waltzing Desdemona around European style; he waltzed her outside, across the yard, over to the cocoonery and back under the grape arbor, and she laughed and covered her mouth with her hand. "You're a good dancer, cousin," she said, and her heart jumped again, making her think she might die right then and there in Eleutherios's arms, but of course she didn't; they danced on. And let's not forget where they were dancing, in Dermidas, that mountain village where cousins married cousins and uncles sometimes married nieces; so that as they danced they began to hold each other more tightly, stopped joking, and then just danced together, as a man and a woman, in lonely and pressing circumstances, might sometimes do.

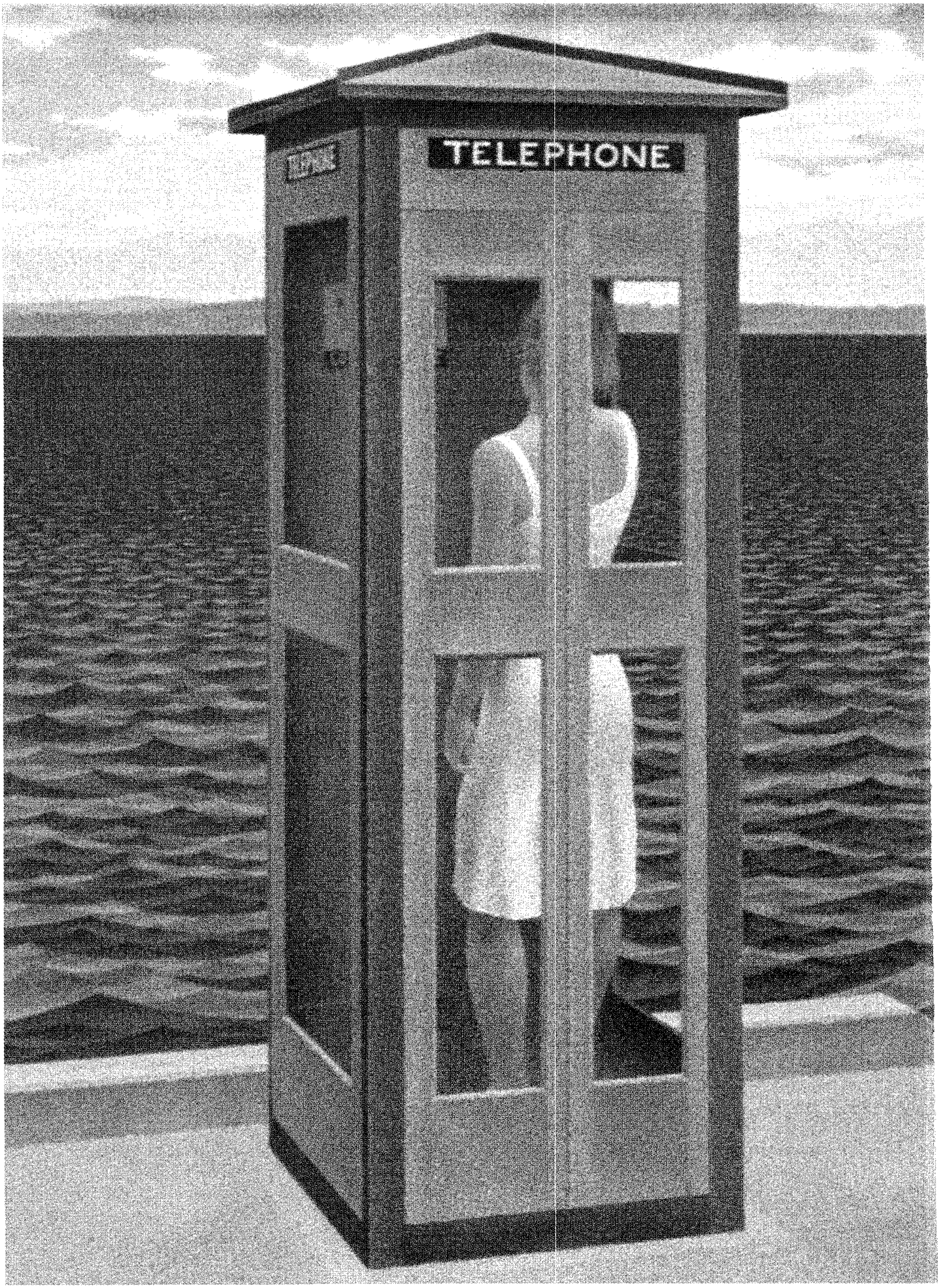
And in the middle of this, before anything had been said outright or any decisions had been made, right then, mid-waltz, they heard explosions in the distance, and looked down to see, in firelight, the Greek Army in full retreat.

The Megala Idea, the brief dream of Greater Greece, had come to an end. The Turks had captured Afyon. The Greek Army, beaten, was fleeing toward the sea. In retreat, soldiers were setting fire to everything in their path. Desdemona and Eleutherios, the next morning, stood on the mountainside and surveyed the devastation. Black smoke rose for miles across the valley. Every village, every field, every tree was aflame.

Eleutherios and Desdemona—my grandparents—left Dermidas on September 22, 1922, for Smyrna, on the Aegean coast. They left on foot, carrying three suitcases roped shut, and a silkworm box with a hundred and nineteen silkworm eggs wrapped in a white cloth. The paper scraps in Eleutherios's pockets were now not gambling debts (those he left behind, never to be repaid) but sketchy forwarding addresses: "D. M. Tatakis, Flatbush, New York, U.S.A." Or "George Pappasdiamondoupolis, c/o cousin Yiannis, Astoria Queens, America." Or "Peter Aristos, Athens or maybe Thessaloniki depending." Over a single week, the fifty-seven citizens of Dermidas packed up their belongings and set out for relatives in America or in Greece. By nightfall, two centuries of Tatakises, Pappases, and Aristoses on Mt. Olympus had come to an end.

Before leaving, Desdemona walked out into the yard and crossed herself in the Orthodox fashion, leading with the thumb. She said her goodbyes: to the powdery, rotting smell of the cocoonery and to the mulberry trees lined along the wall, to the impossible steps she'd never have to climb again, and to this feeling of living above the world, too. She went inside the cocoonery to look at her silkworms for the last time. They had all stopped spinning, in a political protest. She reached up, plucked a cocoon from a mulberry twig, and put it in her tunic pocket. ♦

(*This is the first part of a two-part story.*)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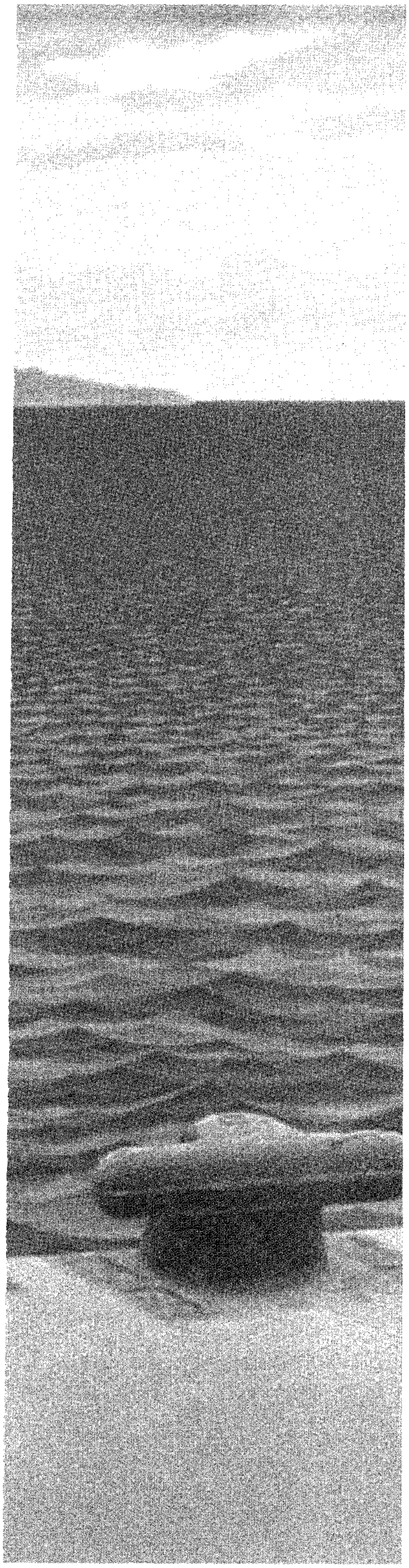


DETAIL OF ALEX COLVILLE'S "DEPARTURE" (1962)

FICTION

THE CHILDREN STAY

Reckless, irresponsible, irrepressible, unstoppable—or lucky?

BY ALICE MUNRO

THIRTY years ago, a family was spending a holiday together on the east coast of Vancouver Island. A young father and mother, their two small daughters, and an older couple, the husband's parents.

What perfect weather. Every morning, every morning it's like this, the first pure sunlight falling through the high branches, burning away the mist over the still water of Georgia Strait.

If it weren't for the tide, it would be hard to remember that this is the sea. You look across the water to the mountains on the mainland, the ranges that are the western wall of the continent of North America. These humps and peaks coming clear now through the mist are of interest to the grandfather and to his son, Brian. The two men are continually trying to decide which of these shapes are actual continental mountains and which are improbable heights of the islands that ride in front of the shore.

There is a map, set up under glass, between the cottages and the beach. You can stand there looking at the map, then looking at what's in front of you and back at the map again, until you get things sorted out. The grandfather and Brian usually get into an argument—though you'd think there would not be much room for disagreement with the map right there.

Brian's mother won't look at the map. She says it boggles her mind. Her concern is always about whether anybody is hungry yet, or thirsty, whether the children have their sun hats on and have been rubbed with protective lotion. She makes her husband wear a floppy cotton hat and thinks that Brian should wear one, too—she reminds him of how sick he got from the sun that summer they went to the Okanagan, when he was a child. Sometimes Brian says to her, "Oh, dry up, Mother." His tone is mostly affectionate, but his father may ask him if that's the way he thinks he can talk to his mother nowadays.

"She doesn't mind," says Brian.

"How do you know?" says his father.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," says his mother.

PAULINE, the young mother, slides out of bed as soon as she's awake every morning, slides out of reach of Brian's long, sleepily searching arms and legs. What wakes her is the first squeaks and mutters of the baby, Mara, in the children's room, then the creak of the crib as Mara—sixteen months old now, getting to the end of babyhood—pulls herself up to stand hanging on to the railing. She continues her soft amiable talk as Pauline lifts her out—Caitlin, nearly five, shifting about but not waking, in her nearby bed—and as she is carried into the kitchen to be changed, on the floor. Then she is settled into her stroller, with a biscuit and a bottle of apple juice, while Pauline gets into her sundress and sandals, goes to the bathroom, combs out her hair—all as quickly and quietly as possible. They leave the cottage and head for the bumpy unpaved road that runs behind the cottages, a mile or so north till it stops at the bank of the little river that runs into the sea. The road is still mostly in deep morning shadow, the floor of a tunnel under fir and cedar trees.

The grandfather, also an early riser, sees them from the porch of his cottage, and Pauline sees him. But all that is necessary is a wave. He and Pauline never have much to say to each other (though sometimes there's an affinity they feel, in the midst of some long-drawn-out antics of Brian's or some apologetic but insistent fuss made by the grandmother, there's an awareness of not looking at each other, lest their look reveal a bleakness that would discredit others).

On this holiday Pauline steals time to be by herself—being with Mara is still almost the same thing as being by herself. Early morning walks, the late morning

In the middle of Monopoly games, Scrabble games, card games. She went right on talking, listening, working, while some memory of her secret life disturbed her like a radiant explosion.

hour when she washes and hangs out the diapers. She could have had another hour or so in the afternoons, while Mara is napping. But Brian has fixed up a shelter on the beach, and he carries the playpen down every day, so that Mara can nap there and Pauline won't have to absent herself. He says his parents might be offended if she's always sneaking off. He agrees, though, that she does need some time to go over her lines for the play she's going to be in, back in Victoria, this September.

Pauline is not an actress. This is an amateur production, and she didn't even try out for the role. She was asked if she would like to be in this play by a man she met at a barbecue, in June. The people there were mostly teachers, and their wives or husbands—it was held at the house of the principal of the high school where Brian taught. The woman who taught French was a widow—she had brought her grown son, who was staying for the summer with her and working as a night clerk in a downtown hotel. She told everybody that he had got a job teaching at a college in western Washington State and would be going there in the fall.

Jeffrey Toom was his name. "Without the 'b,' " he said, as if the staleness of the joke wounded him.

What was he going to teach?

"Dram-ah," he said, drawing the word out in a mocking way.

He spoke of his present job disparagingly as well.

"It's a pretty sordid place," he said. "Maybe you heard—a hooker was killed there last February. And then we get the usual losers checking in to O.D. or bump themselves off."

People did not quite know what to make of this way of talking and drifted away from him. Except for Pauline.

"I'm thinking about putting on a play," he said. He asked her if she had ever heard of "Eurydice."

Pauline said, "You mean Anouilh's?" and he was unflatteringly surprised. He immediately said he didn't know if it would ever work out. "I just thought it might be interesting to see if you could do something different here in the land of Noël Coward."

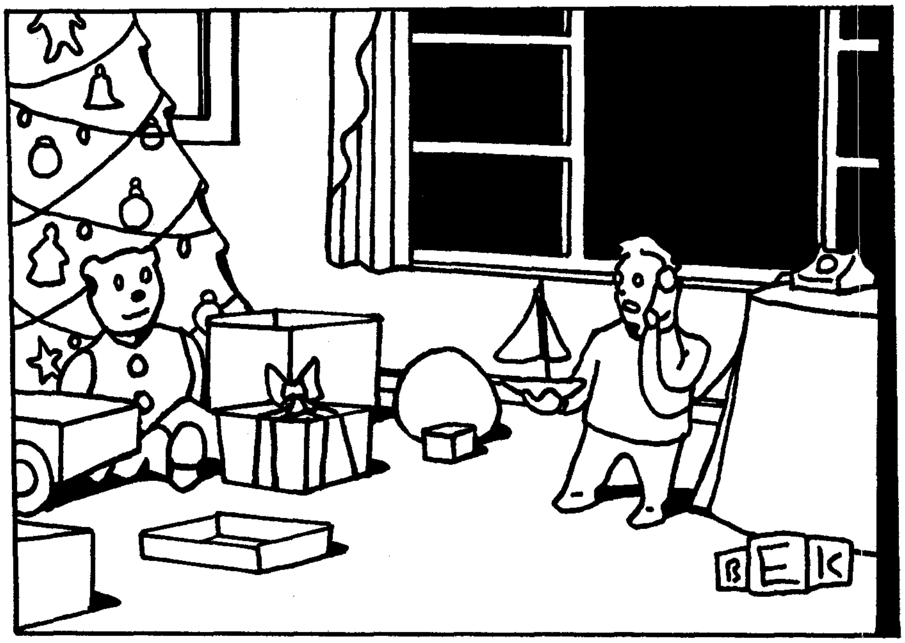
Pauline did not remember when there had been a play by Noël Coward put on in Victoria, though she supposed there had been several. She said, "We saw 'The Duchess of Malfi' last winter at the college."

"Yeah. Well," he said, flushing. She had thought he was older than she was, at least as old as Brian—who was thirty, though people were apt to say he didn't act it—but as soon as he started talking to her, in this offhand, dismissive way, never quite meeting her eyes, she suspected that he was younger than he'd like to appear. Now, with that flush, she was sure of it.

As it turned out, he was a year younger than she was. Twenty-five.

She said that she couldn't be Eurydice—she couldn't act. But Brian came over to see what the conversation was about and said at once that she must try it.

"She just needs a kick in the behind," Brian said to Jeffrey. "She's like a little mule—it's hard to get her started. No, seriously, she's too self-effacing. I tell her that all the time. She's very smart. She's actually a lot smarter than I am."



"Things are crazy right now. Let me get back to you after the holidays."

At that Jeffrey did look directly into Pauline's eyes—impertinently and searchingly—and she was the one who was flushing.

He had chosen her immediately as his Eurydice because of the way she looked. But it was not because she was beautiful. "I'd never put a beautiful girl in that part," he said. "I don't know if I'd ever put a beautiful girl onstage in anything. It's distracting."

So what did he mean about the way she looked? He said it was her hair, which was long and dark and rather bushy (not in style at that time), and her pale skin ("Stay out of the sun this summer") and, most of all, her eyebrows.

"I never liked them," said Pauline, not quite sincerely. Her eyebrows were level, dark, luxuriant. They dominated her face. Like her hair, they were not in style. But if she had really disliked them, wouldn't she have plucked them?

Jeffrey seemed not to have heard her. "They give you a sulky look and that's disturbing," he said. "Also your jaw's a little heavy and that's sort of Greek. It would be better in a movie, where I could get you close up. The routine thing for Eurydice would be a girl who looked ethereal. I don't want ethereal."

As she walked Mara along the road, Pauline did work at the lines. There was a long speech at the end that was giving her trouble. She bumped the stroller along and repeated to herself, "You are terrible, you know, you are terrible like the angels. You think everybody's going forward, as brave and bright as you are—oh, don't look at me, please, darling, don't look at me— Perhaps I'm not what you wish I was, but I'm here, and I'm warm, I'm kind, and I love you. I'll give you all the happiness I can. Don't look at me. Don't look. Let me live."

She had left something out. "Perhaps I'm not what you wish I was, but you feel me here, don't you? I'm warm and I'm kind—"

She had told Jeffrey that she thought the play was beautiful.

He said, "Really?" What she'd said didn't please or surprise him—he seemed to feel it was predictable, superfluous. He would never describe a play in that way. He spoke of it more as a hurdle to be got over. Also a challenge to be flung at various enemies. At the academic snots, as he called them, who had done "The Duchess of Malfi." And at the social twits, as he called them, in the little theatre. He saw himself as an outsider heaving his weight against these people, putting on his play—he called it his—in the teeth of their contempt and opposition. In the beginning Pauline thought that this must be all in his imagination. Then something would happen that could be, but might not be, a coincidence—repairs to be done on the church hall where the play was to be performed, making it unobtainable, an unexpected increase in the cost of printing advertising posters—and she found herself seeing it his way. If you were going to be around him much, you almost had to see it his way—arguing was dangerous and exhausting.

"Sons of bitches," said Jeffrey between his teeth, but with some satisfaction. "I'm *not surprised. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."*

"Nobody move! I think I lost an eye."

• •

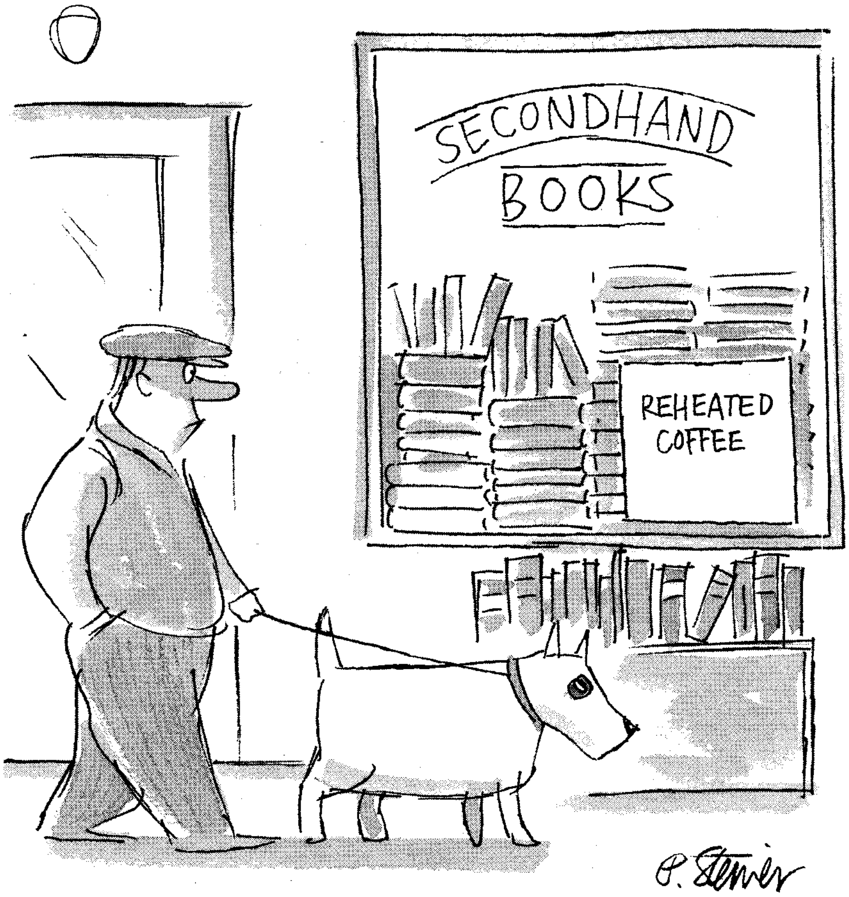
THE rehearsals were held upstairs in an old building on Fisgard Street. Sunday afternoon was the only time that everybody could get there, though there were fragmentary rehearsals during the week. Pauline had to depend on sometimes undependable high-school babysitters—for the first six weeks of the summer Brian was busy teaching summer school. And Jeffrey himself had to be at his hotel job by eight o'clock in the evening. But on Sunday afternoons they were all there, laboring in the dusty high-ceilinged room on Fisgard Street. The windows were rounded at the top as in some plain and dignified church, and propped open in the heat with whatever objects could be found—ledger books from the nineteen-twenties, belonging to the hat shop that had once operated downstairs, pieces of wood left over from the picture frames made by the artist whose canvases were now stacked against one wall and apparently abandoned. The glass was grimy, but outside the sunlight bounced off the sidewalks, the empty gravelled parking lots, the low stuccoed buildings, with what seemed a special Sunday brightness. Hardly anybody moved through these downtown streets. Nothing was open except the occasional hole-in-the-wall coffee shop or lackadaisical, flyspecked convenience store.

Pauline was the one who went out at the break to get soft drinks and coffee. She was the one who had the least to say about the play and the way it was going—even though she was the only one who had read it before—because she alone had never done any acting. So it seemed proper for her to volunteer. She enjoyed her short walk in the empty streets—she felt as if she had become an urban person, someone detached and solitary, who lived in the glare of an important dream. Sometimes she thought of Brian at home, working in the garden and keeping an eye on the children. Or perhaps he had taken them to Dallas Road—she recalled a promise—to sail boats on the pond. That life seemed ragged and tedious compared to what went on in the rehearsal room—the hours of effort, the concentration, the sharp exchanges, the sweating and tension. Even the taste of the coffee, its scalding bitterness, and the fact that it was chosen by nearly everybody in preference to a fresher-tasting and maybe more healthful drink out of the cooler, seemed satisfying to her.

WHEN she said that she had to go away for the two-week holiday, Jeffrey looked thunderstruck, as if he had never imagined that things like holidays could come into her life. Then he turned grim and slightly satirical, as if this were just another blow that he might have expected. Pauline explained that she would miss only the one Sunday—the one in the middle of the two weeks—because she and Brian were driving up the Island on a Monday and coming back on a Sunday morning. She promised to get back in time for rehearsal. Privately she wondered how she would do this—it always took so much longer than you expected to pack up and get away. She wondered if she could possibly come back by herself, on the morning bus. That would probably be too much to ask for. She didn't mention it.

She couldn't ask him if it was only the play he was thinking about, only her absence from a rehearsal that caused the thundercloud. At the moment, it very likely was. When he spoke to her at rehearsals there was never any suggestion that he ever spoke to her in any other way. The only difference in his treatment of her was that perhaps he expected less of her, of her acting, than he did of the others. And that would be understandable to anybody. She was the only one chosen out of the blue, for the way she looked—the others had all shown up at the audition he had advertised on signs put up in cafés and bookstores around town.

Yet she thought they all knew what was going on, in spite of Jeffrey's offhand and abrupt and none too civil ways. They knew that after every one of them had straggled off home he would walk across the room and bolt the staircase door. (At first Pauline had pretended to leave with the rest and had even got into her car and circled the block, but later such



a trick had come to seem insulting, not just to herself and Jeffrey but to the others, whom she was sure would never betray her, bound as they all were under the temporary but potent spell of the play.)

Jeffrey crossed the room and bolted the door. Every time, this was like a new decision that he had to make. Until it was done, she wouldn't look at him. The sound of the bolt being pushed into place, the ominous or fatalistic sound of metal hitting metal, gave her a localized shock of capitulation. But she didn't make a move, she waited for him to come back to her with the whole story of the afternoon's labor draining out of his face, the expression of matter-of-fact and customary disappointment cleared away, replaced by the live energy she always found surprising.

“So. Tell us what this play of yours is about,” Brian's father said. “Is it one of those ones where they take their clothes off on the stage?”

“Now, don't tease her,” said Brian's mother.

Brian and Pauline had put the children to bed and walked over to his parents' cottage for an evening drink. The sunset was behind them, behind the forests of Vancouver Island, but the mountains in front of them, all clear now and hard cut against the sky, shone in its pink light. Some high inland mountains were capped with pink summer snow.

“The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is that Eurydice died,” Pauline said. “And Orpheus goes down to the underworld to try to get her back. And his wish is granted, but only if he promises not to look at her. Not to look back at her. She's walking behind him—”

“Twelve paces,” said Brian. “As is only right.”

“It's a Greek story, but it's set in modern times,” said Pauline. “At least this version is. More or less modern. Orpheus is a musician travelling around with his father—they're both musicians—and Eurydice is an actress. This is in France.”

“Translated?” Brian's father said.

“No,” said Brian. “But don't worry, it's not in French. It was written in Transylvanian.”

“It's so hard to make sense of anything,” Brian's mother said with a worried laugh. “It's so hard, with Brian around.”

“It's in English,” Pauline said.

“And you're what's-her-name?”

She said, “I'm Eurydice.”

“He get you back O.K.?”

“No,” she said. “He looks back at me and then I have to stay dead.”

“Oh, an unhappy ending,” Brian's mother said.

“You're so gorgeous?” said Brian's father skeptically. “He can't stop himself from looking back?”

“It's not that,” said Pauline. But at this point she felt that something had been achieved by her father-in-law, he had done what he meant to do, which was the same thing that he nearly always meant to do, in any conversation she had with him. And that was to break through the careful structure of some explanation he had asked her for, and she had unwillingly but patiently given, and with a seemingly negligent kick knock it into rubble. He had been dangerous to her for a long time in this way, though he wasn't particularly so tonight.

But Brian did not know that. Brian was still figuring out how to come to her rescue.

“Pauline is gorgeous,” Brian said.

“Yes indeed,” said his mother.

“Maybe if she'd go to the hairdresser,” his father said. But Pauline's long hair was such an old objection of his that it had become a family joke. Even Pauline laughed. She said, “I can't afford to till we get the veranda roof fixed.” And Brian laughed boisterously, full of relief that she was able to take all this as a joke. It was what he had always told her to do.

“Just kid him back. It's the only way to handle him.”

“Yeah, well, if you'd got yourselves a decent house,” said his father. But this, like Pauline's hair, was such a familiar sore point that it couldn't rouse anybody. Brian and Pauline had bought a handsome house in bad repair on a street in Victoria where old mansions were being turned into ill-used apartment buildings. The house, the street, the messy old Garry oaks, the fact that no basement had been blasted out under the house, was all a horror to Brian's father. So what he said now about a decent house might be some kind of peace signal. Or could be taken so.

Brian was an only son. He was a math teacher. His father was a civil engineer, and part owner of a contracting company. If he had hoped that he would have a son who was an engineer and might come into the company, there was never any mention of it. Pauline had asked Brian whether he thought the carping about their house, and her hair, and the books she read, might be a cover for this larger disappointment, but Brian had said, "Nope. In our family we complain about just whatever we want to complain about. We ain't subtle, Ma'am."

Pauline still wondered, when she heard his mother talking about how teachers ought to be the most honored people in the world and they did not get half the credit they deserved and that she didn't know how Brian managed it, day after day. Then his father might say, "That's right," or "I sure wouldn't want to do it, I can tell you that. They couldn't pay me to do it."

And Brian would turn that into a joke, as he turned nearly everything into a joke.

"Don't worry, Dad. They don't pay you much."

Brian in his everyday life was a much more dramatic person than Jeffrey. He dominated his classes by keeping up a parade of jokes and antics, extending the role that he had always played, Pauline believed, with his mother and father. He acted dumb, he bounced back from pretended humiliations, he traded insults. He was a bully in a good cause—a chivying, cheerful, indestructible bully.

"Your boy has certainly made his mark with us," the principal said to Pauline. "He has not just survived, which is something in itself. He has made his mark."

Your boy.

He called his students boneheads. His tone was affectionate, fatalistic. He said that his father was the King of the Philistines, a pure and natural barbarian. And that his mother was a dishrag, good-natured and worn out. But however he dismissed such people, he could not be long without them. He took his students on camping trips. And he could not imagine a summer without this shared holiday. He was mortally afraid, every year, that Pauline would refuse to go along. Or that, having agreed to go, she was going to be miserable, take offense at something his father said, complain about how much time she had to spend with his mother, sulk because there was no way they could do anything by themselves. She might decide to spend all day in their own cottage, reading, and pretending to have a sunburn.

All those things had happened, on previous holidays. But this year she was easing up. He told her he could see that, and he was grateful to her.

"I know it's an effort," he said. "It's different for me. They're my parents and I'm used to not taking them seriously."

Pauline came from a family that took things so seriously that her parents had got a divorce. Her mother was now dead. She had a distant, though cordial, relationship with her father and her two much older sisters. She said that they had nothing in common. She knew Brian could not understand how that could be a reason. She saw what comfort it gave him, this year, to see things going so well. She had thought it was laziness or cowardice that kept him from breaking the arrangement, but now she saw that it was something far more positive. He needed to have his wife and his parents and his children bound together like this, he needed to involve Pauline in his life with his parents and to bring his parents to some recognition of her—though the recognition, from his father, would always be muffled and contrary, and from his mother too profuse, too easily come by, to mean much. Also he wanted Pauline to be connected—and the children, too—to his own childhood. He wanted these holidays to be linked to the holidays of his youth with their lucky or unlucky weather, car troubles, boating scares, bee stings, marathon Monopoly games, to all the things that he told his mother he was bored to death hearing about. He wanted pictures from this summer to be taken, and fitted into his mother's album, a continuation of all the other pictures that he groaned at the mention of.

The only time they could talk to each other was in bed, late at night. But they did talk then, more than was usual with them at home, where Brian was so tired that often he fell immediately asleep. And in ordinary daylight it was hard to talk to him because of his jokes. She could see the joke brightening his eyes. (His coloring was very like hers—dark hair and pale skin and gray eyes—but her eyes were cloudy and his were light, like clear water over stones.) She could see it pulling at the corners of his mouth as he foraged among your words to catch a pun or the start of a rhyme—anything that could take the conversation away, into absurdity. His whole body, tall and loosely joined together and still almost as skinny as a teenager's, twitched with comic propensity. Before she married him, Pauline had a friend named Gracie, a rather grumpy-looking girl, subversive about men. Brian had thought her a girl whose spirits needed a boost, and so he made even more than the usual effort. And Gracie said to Pauline, "How can you stand the non-stop show?"

"That's not the real Brian," Pauline had said. "He's different when we're alone." But, looking back, she wondered how true that had ever been. Had she said it simply to defend her choice, as you did when you had made up your mind to get married?

Even in the cottage, with the window open on the unfamiliar darkness and stillness of the night, he teased a little. He had to speak of Jeffrey as Monsieur le Directeur, which made the play, or the fact that it was a French play, slightly ridiculous. Or perhaps it was Jeffrey himself, Jeffrey's seriousness about the play, that had to be called into question.

Pauline didn't care. It was such a pleasure and a relief to her to mention Jeffrey's name.

Though most of the time she didn't mention him, she circled around that pleasure. She described all the others instead. The hairdresser and the harbor pilot and the busboy and the old man who claimed to have once acted on the radio. He played Orphée's father, and gave Jeffrey the most trouble, because he had the stubbornest notions of his own about acting.

The middle-aged impresario, M. Dulac, was played by a twenty-four-year-old travel agent. And Mathias, who was Eurydice's former boyfriend, presumably around her own age, was played by the manager of a shoe store, who was married and a father.

"Why didn't Monsieur le Directeur cast those two the other way round?" said Brian.

"That's the way he does things," Pauline said. "What he sees in us is something different from the obvious."

For instance, she said, the busboy was a difficult Orphée.

"He's only nineteen, he's terribly shy, but he's determined to be an actor. Even if it's like making love to his grandmother. Jeffrey has to keep at him. 'Keep your arms around her a little longer, stroke her a little—' "

"He might get to like it," Brian

said. "Maybe I should come around and keep an eye on him."

At this Pauline snorted. When she had started to quote Jeffrey she had felt a giving-way in her womb or the bottom of her stomach, a shock that had travelled oddly upward and hit her vocal cords. She had to cover up this quaking by growling in a way that was supposed to be an imitation (though Jeffrey never growled or ranted or carried on in any theatrical way at all).

Stroke her a little.

"But there's a point about him being so innocent," she said hurriedly. "Being not so physical. Being awkward." She began to talk about Orphée in the play, not the busboy—Orphée's problems with love and reality. Orphée will not put up with anything less than perfection. He wants a love that is outside of ordinary life. He wants a perfect Eurydice.

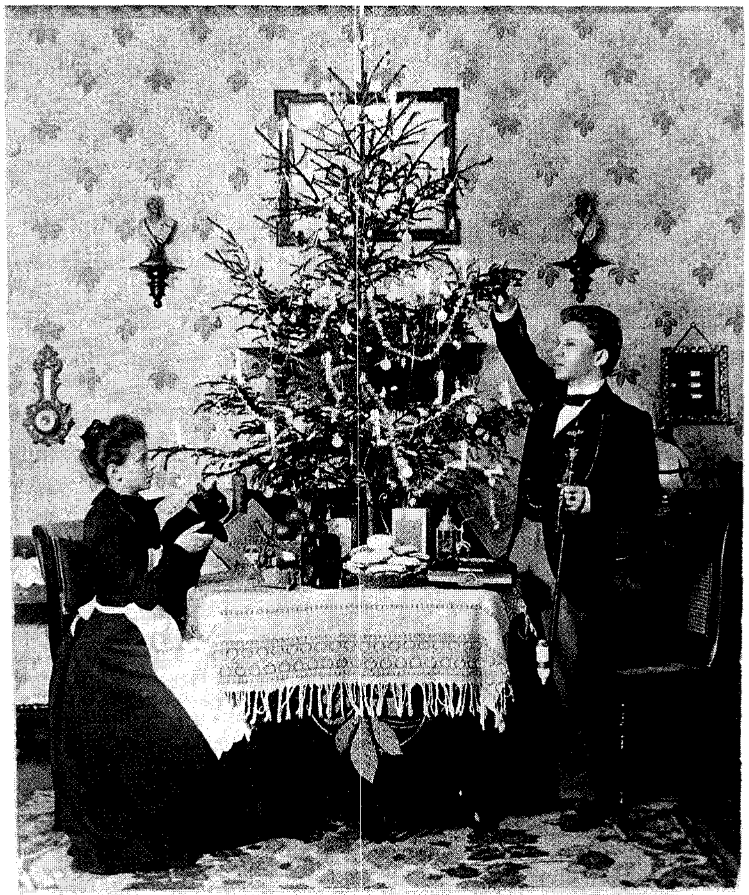
"Eurydice is more realistic. She's carried on with Mathias and with M. Dulac. She's been around her mother and her mother's lover. She knows what people are like. But she loves Orphée. She loves him better, in a way, than he loves her. She loves him better because she's not such a fool. She loves him like a human person."

"She's slept with those other guys?"

"Well, with M. Dulac she had to, she

STILLE NÄCHTE

The Berliners Anna and Richard Wagner took pleasure in documenting their Christmases together—forty-five in all—as greeting cards for friends. Published in Germany last winter under the title "German Christmas—A Family Album," the photographs constitute a poignant record of gutbürgerlich domesticity. As newlyweds, in 1900, the Wagners were full of optimism. (Mietz, their cat, looks less sure.) A wartime coal shortage in 1917 brought out the overcoats, but by 1924 things were looking up—hence the whimsical housecoats. Three years later came electrical appliances, including new Osram tree lights and a Progress vacuum sweeper. In 1935, an electric heater took the chill off an uncommonly frigid winter. During the German Army's debacle at Stalingrad, in 1942, the Wagners were thin and drawn; this is the final surviving holiday photograph of the couple.



Erste Weihnachten 1900

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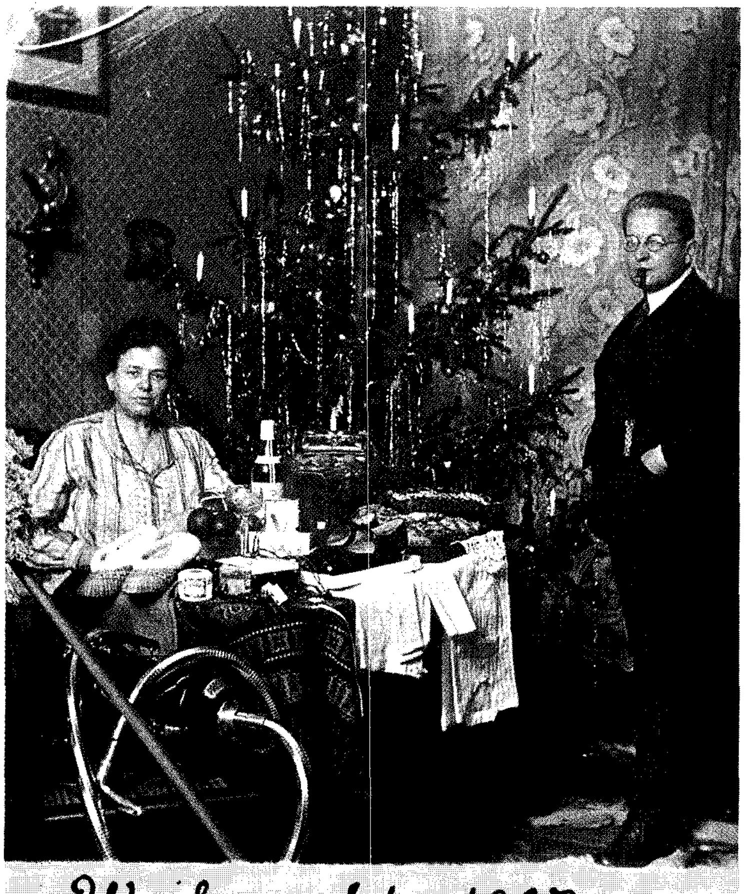

Weihnachten 1927

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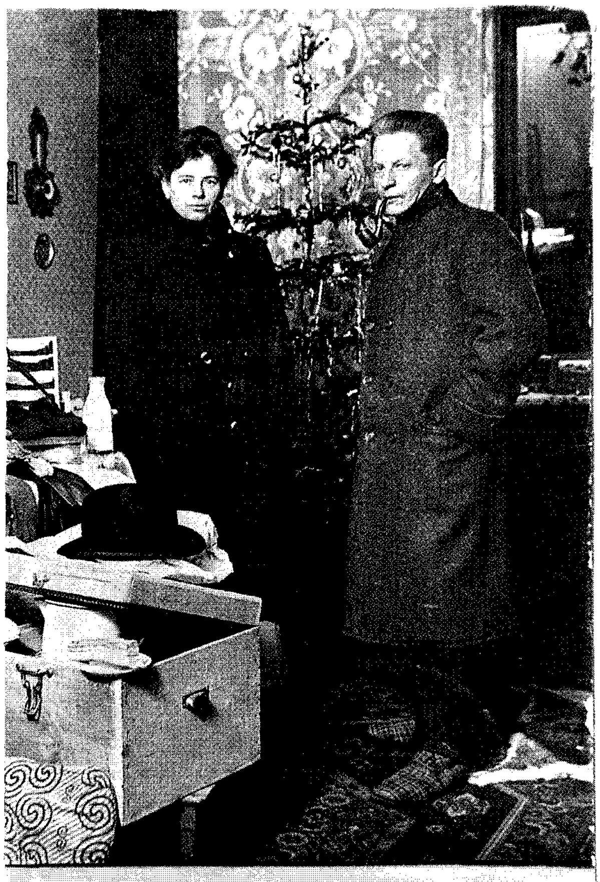

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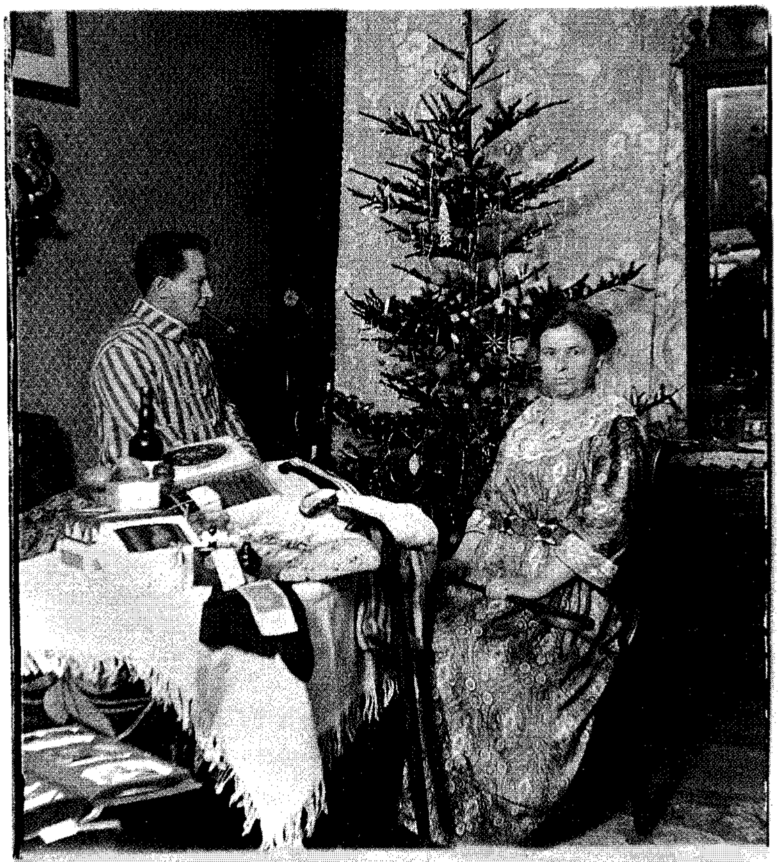
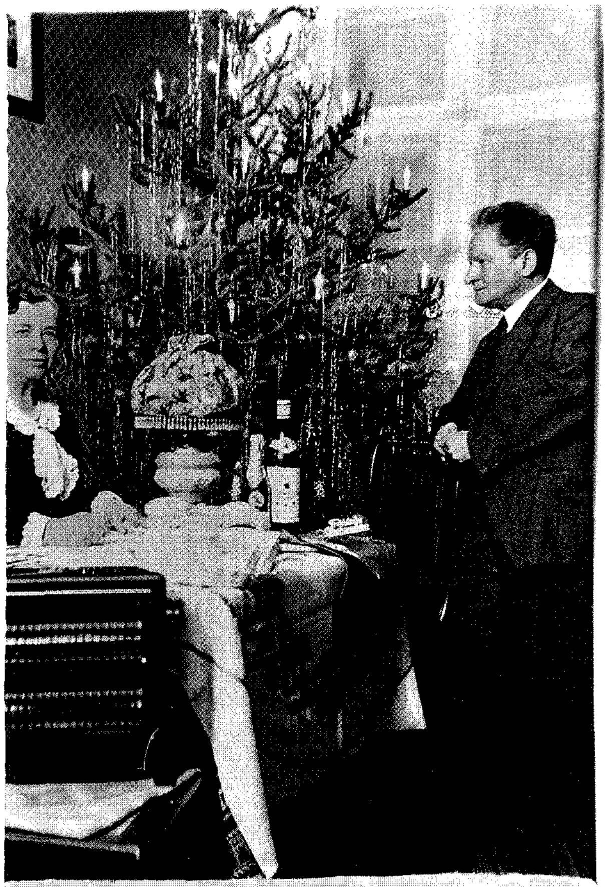


Weihnachten 1924.



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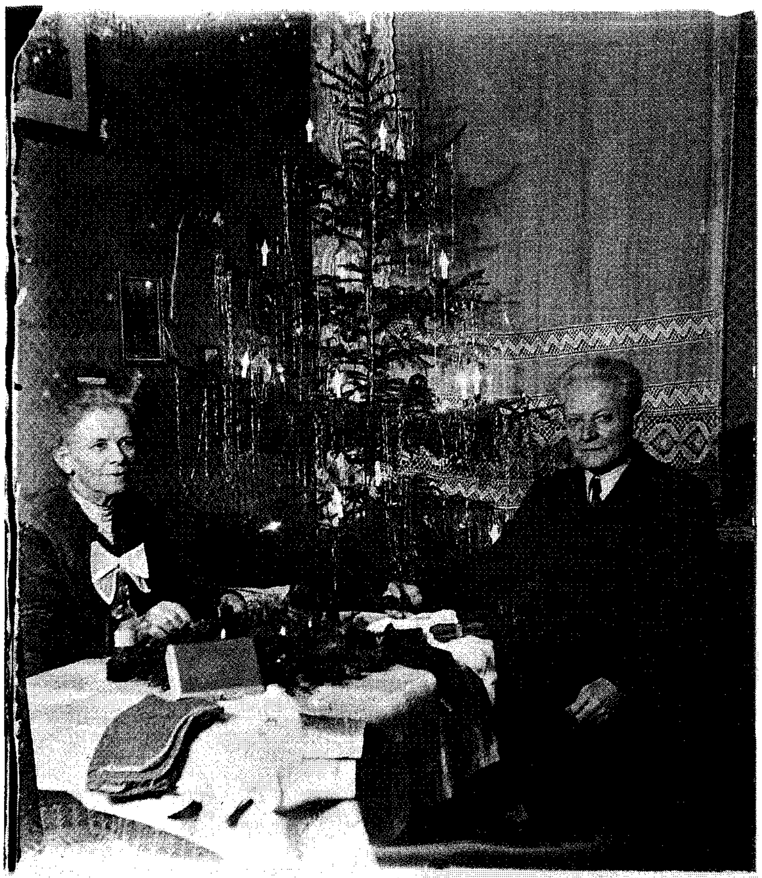


Weihnachten 1942

DEUTSCHE WEIHNACHT: EIN FAMILIENALBUM 1900-1945/©NICOLAI VERLAG, BERLIN, GERMANY

couldn't get out of it. She didn't want to, but probably after a while she enjoyed it, because after a certain point she couldn't help enjoying it. Just because she's slept with those men doesn't mean she's corrupt," Pauline said. "She wasn't in love then. She hadn't met Orphée. There's one speech where he tells her that everything she's done is sticking to her, and it's disgusting. Lies she's told him. The other men. It's all sticking to her forever. And then of course M. Henri plays up to that. He tells Orphée that he'll be just as bad and that one day he'll walk down the street with Eurydice and he'll look like a man with a dog he's trying to lose."

Brian laughed. He said, "That could be true."

"But not inevitably," said Pauline. "That's what's silly. It's not inevitable at all."

So Orphée is at fault, Pauline said decidedly. He looks back at Eurydice on purpose to kill her and get rid of her because she isn't perfect. Because of him she has to die a second time.

Brian, on his back and with his eyes wide open (she knew that because of the tone of his voice), said, "But doesn't he die, too?"

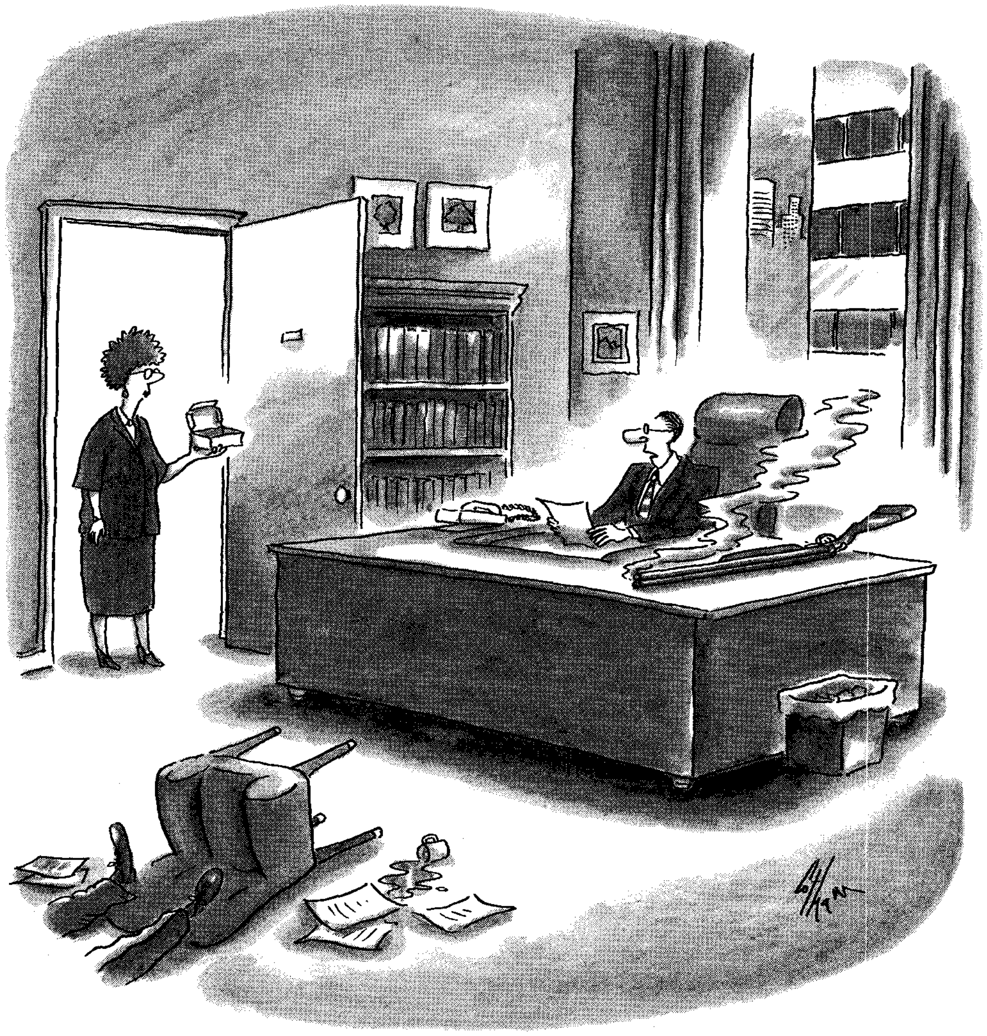
"Yes. He chooses to."

"So then they're together?"

"Yes. Like Romeo and Juliet. Orphée is with Eurydice at last. That's what M. Henri says. That's the last line of the play. That's the end." Pauline rolled over onto her side and touched her cheek to Brian's shoulder—not to start anything but to emphasize what she said next. "It's a beautiful play in one way but in another it's so silly. And it isn't really like 'Romeo and Juliet,' because it isn't bad luck or circumstances. It's on purpose. So they don't have to go on with life and get married and have kids and buy an old house and fix it up and—"

"And have affairs," said Brian. "After all, they're French."

Then he said, "And be like my parents."



"No—a bigger box."

Pauline laughed. "Do they have affairs? I can't imagine."

"Oh, sure," said Brian. "I meant their life."

"Oh."

"Logically I can see killing yourself so you won't turn into your parents. I just don't believe anybody would do it."

They went on speculating, and comfortably arguing, in a way that was not usual, but not altogether unfamiliar to them. They had done this before, at long intervals in their married life—talked half the night about God or fear of death or how children should be educated or whether money was important. At last they admitted to being too tired to make sense any longer, and arranged themselves in a comradely cuddle and went to sleep.

FINALLY a rainy day. Brian and his parents were driving into Campbell River to get groceries, and gin, and to take Brian's father's car to a garage. Brian had to go along, with his car, just in case the other car had to be left in the garage overnight. Pauline said that she had to stay home because of Mara's nap.

She persuaded Caitlin to lie down, too—allowing her to take her music box to bed with her if she played it under the covers. Then Pauline spread the script on the kitchen table, and drank coffee and went over the scene in which Orphée says that it's intolerable, at last, to stay in two skins, two envelopes with their own blood and oxygen sealed up in their solitude, and Eurydice tells him to be quiet.

"Don't talk. Don't think. Just let your hand wander, let it be happy on its own."

Your hand is my happiness, says Eurydice. Accept that. Accept your happiness.

Of course he says he cannot.

Caitlin called out frequently to ask what time it was, and Pauline could hear the music box. She hurried to the bedroom door and hissed at her to turn it off, not to wake Mara.

"If you play it like that again I'll take it away from you. O.K.?"

But Mara was already rustling around in her crib and in the next few minutes there were sounds of soft, encouraging conversation from

Caitlin, designed to get her sister wide awake. Then of Mara rattling the crib railing, pulling herself up, throwing her bottle out onto the floor, and starting the bird cries that would grow more and more desolate until they brought her mother.

"I didn't wake her," Caitlin said. "She was awake all by herself. It's not raining anymore. Can we go down to the beach?"

She was right. It wasn't raining. Pauline changed Mara, told Caitlin to get her bathing suit on and find her sand pail. She got into her own bathing suit and put on her shorts on top of it, in case the rest of the family arrived home while she was down there. ("Dad doesn't like the way some women just go right out of their cottages in their bathing suits," Brian's mother had said to her. "I guess he and I just grew up in other times.") She picked up the script to take it along, then laid it down. She was afraid that she would get too absorbed in it and take her eye off the children for a moment too long.

The thoughts that came to her, of Jeffrey, were not really thoughts at all—they were more like alterations in her body. This could happen when she was sitting on the beach (trying to stay in the half shade of a bush and so preserve her pallor, as Jeffrey had ordered). Or when she was wringing out diapers, or when she and Brian were visiting his parents. In the middle of Monopoly games, Scrabble games, card games. She went right on talking, listening, working, keeping track of the children, while some memory of her secret life disturbed her like a radiant explosion. Then a warm weight settled, reassurance filling up all her hollows. But it didn't last, this comfort leaked away, and she was like a miser whose windfall has vanished and who is convinced such luck can never strike again. Longing buckled her up and drove her to the discipline of counting days. Sometimes she even cut the days into fractions to figure out more exactly how much time had gone.

She thought of going in to Campbell River, making some excuse, so that she could get to a phone booth and call him. The cottages had no phones—the only public phone was in the hall of the Lodge, across from the entrance to the dining room. But she did not have the number of the hotel where Jeffrey worked. And, besides that, she could never get away to Campbell River in the evening. She was afraid that if she called him at home in the daytime his mother the French teacher might answer. He said she hardly ever left the house in the summer. Just once, she had taken the ferry to Vancouver for the day. Jeffrey had phoned Pauline to ask her to come over. Brian was teaching and Caitlin was at her play group.

Pauline said, "I can't. I have Mara."

"Couldn't you bring her along?" he asked.

She said no.

"Why not? Couldn't you bring some things for her to play with?"

No, said Pauline. "I couldn't," she said. "I just couldn't." It seemed too dangerous to her, to trundle her baby along on such a guilty expedition. To a house where cleaning fluids would not be bestowed on high shelves and all pills and cough syrups and cigarettes and buttons put safely out of reach. And even if she escaped poisoning or choking, Mara might be storing up time bombs—memories of a strange house where she was strangely disregarded, of a closed door, noises on the other side of it.

"I just wanted you," Jeffrey said. "I just wanted you in my bed."

She said again, weakly, "No."

Those words of his kept coming back to her. I wanted you in my bed. A half-joking urgency in his voice but also a determination, a practicality, as if "in my bed" meant something more, the bed he spoke of taking on larger, less material dimensions.

Had she made a great mistake, with that refusal? With that reminder of how fenced in she was, in what anybody would call her real life?

The beach was nearly empty—people had got used to its being a rainy day. The sand was too heavy for Caitlin to make a castle or dig an irrigation system—projects she would undertake only with her father, anyway, because she sensed that his interest in them was wholehearted, and Pauline's was not. She wandered a bit forlornly at the edge of the water, missing the presence of other children, the nameless instant friends and occasional stone-throwing, water-kicking enemies, the shrieking and splashing and falling about. A boy a little bigger than she was and apparently all by himself stood knee deep in the water farther down the beach. If these two could get together it might be all right, the whole beach experience might be retrieved. Pauline couldn't tell if Caitlin was now making those little splashy runs into the water for his benefit, or whether he was watching her with interest or scorn.

Mara didn't need company, at least for now. She stumbled toward the water, felt it touch her feet and changed her mind, stopped, looked around, and spotted Pauline. "Paw. Paw," she said, in happy recognition. "Paw" was what she said for "Pauline," instead of "Mother" or "Mommy." Looking around overbalanced her; she sat down half on the sand and half in the water, made a squawk of surprise which turned into an announcement, and then, by some determined ungraceful maneuvers that involved putting her weight on her hands, rose to her feet, wavering and triumphant. She had been walking for half a year, but getting around on the sand was still a challenge. Now she came back toward Pauline, making some reasonable casual remarks in her own language.

"Sand," said Pauline, holding up a clot of it. "Look. Mara. Sand."

Mara corrected her, calling it something else—it sounded like "whap." Her thick diaper under her plastic pants and her terry-cloth playsuit gave her a fat bottom, and that, along with her plump cheeks and shoulders and her sidelong important expression, made her look like a roguish matron.

Pauline became aware of someone calling her name. It had been called two or three times, but because the voice was unfamiliar she had not recognized it. She stood up and waved. It was the woman who worked in the store at the Lodge. She was leaning over the porch rail and calling, "Mrs. Keating. Mrs. Keating? Telephone, Mrs. Keating."

Pauline hoisted Mara onto her hip and summoned Caitlin. She and the little boy were aware of each other now: they were both picking up stones from the bottom and flinging them out into the water. At first she didn't hear Pauline, or pretended not to hear.

"Store," called Pauline. "Caitlin. Store." When she was sure Caitlin would follow—it was the word "store" that had done it, the reminder of the tiny store in the Lodge where you could buy ice cream and candy—she began the trek across the sand and up the flight of wooden steps. Halfway up she stopped, said, "Mara, you weigh a ton," and shifted the baby to her other hip. Caitlin followed, banging a stick against the railing.

"Can I have a Fudgsicle? Mother? Can I?"

"We'll see."

The public phone was beside a bulletin board on the other side of the main hall and across from the door to the dining room. A bingo game had been set up in there, because of the rain.

"Hope he's still hanging on," the woman who worked in the store called out. She was unseen now behind her counter.

Pauline, still holding Mara, picked up the dangling receiver and said breathlessly, "Hello?" She was expecting to hear Brian telling her about some delay in Campbell River or asking her what it was she had wanted him to get at the drugstore. It was just the one thing—calamine lotion—so he had not written it down.

"Pauline," said Jeffrey. "It's me."

Mara was bumping and scrambling along Pauline's side, eager to get down. Caitlin came along the hall and went into the store, leaving wet sandy footprints. Pauline said, "Just a minute, just a minute." She let Mara slide down and hurried to close the door that led to the steps. She did not remember telling Jeffrey the name of this place, though she had told him roughly where it was. She heard the woman in the store speaking to Caitlin in a sharper voice than she would use to children whose parents were beside them.

"Did you forget to put your feet under the tap?"

"I'm here," said Jeffrey. "I didn't get along so well without you. I didn't get along at all."

Mara made for the dining room, as if the male voice calling out "Under the N" were a direct invitation to her.

"Here. Where?" said Pauline.

She read the signs that were tacked up on the bulletin board beside the phone:

> No Person Under Fourteen Years of Age Not Accompanied by Adult Allowed in Boats or Canoes.
>
> Fishing Derby.
>
> Bake and Craft Sale, St. Bartholomew's Church.
>
> Your life is in your hands. Palms and Cards read. Reasonable and Accurate. Call Claire.

"In a motel. In Campbell River."

PAULINE knows where she is before she opens her eyes. Nothing surprises her. She has slept, but not deeply enough to let go of anything.

She had waited for Brian in the parking area of the Lodge, with the children in tow, and then she had asked for the keys. She told him in front of his parents that there was something else she needed, from Campbell River. He asked what was it? And did she have any money?

"Just something," she said, so he would think that it was tampons or birth-control supplies, something that she didn't want to mention.

"Sure. O.K., but you'll have to put some gas in," he said.

Later she had to speak to him on the phone. Jeffrey said she had to do it.

"Because he won't take it from me. He'll think I kidnapped you or something. He won't believe it."

But the strangest thing of all the things that day was that Brian did seem, immediately, to believe it. Standing where she had stood not so long before, in the public hallway of the Lodge—the bingo game over now, but people going past, she could hear them, people on their way out of the dining room after dinner—Brian had said, "Oh. Oh. Oh. O.K.," in a voice that would have to be quickly controlled but that seemed to draw on a supply of fatalism or foreknowledge that went far beyond that necessity.

"O.K.," he said. "What about the car?"

He said something else, something impossible, and then hung up, and she came out of the phone booth beside a row of gas pumps in Campbell River.

"That was quick," Jeffrey said. "Easier than you expected?"

Pauline said, "I don't know."

"He may have known it subconsciously. People do know."

She shook her head, to tell him not to say any more, and he said, "Sorry." They walked along the street not touching or talking.

Now, looking around at leisure—the first real leisure or freedom she's had since she came into that room—Pauline sees that there isn't much of anything in it. Just a junky dresser, the bed without a headboard, an armless upholstered chair. On the window a Venetian blind with a broken slat. Also a noisy air-conditioner—Jeffrey turned it off in the night and left the door open on the chain, since the window was sealed. The door is shut now. He must have got up in the night and shut it.

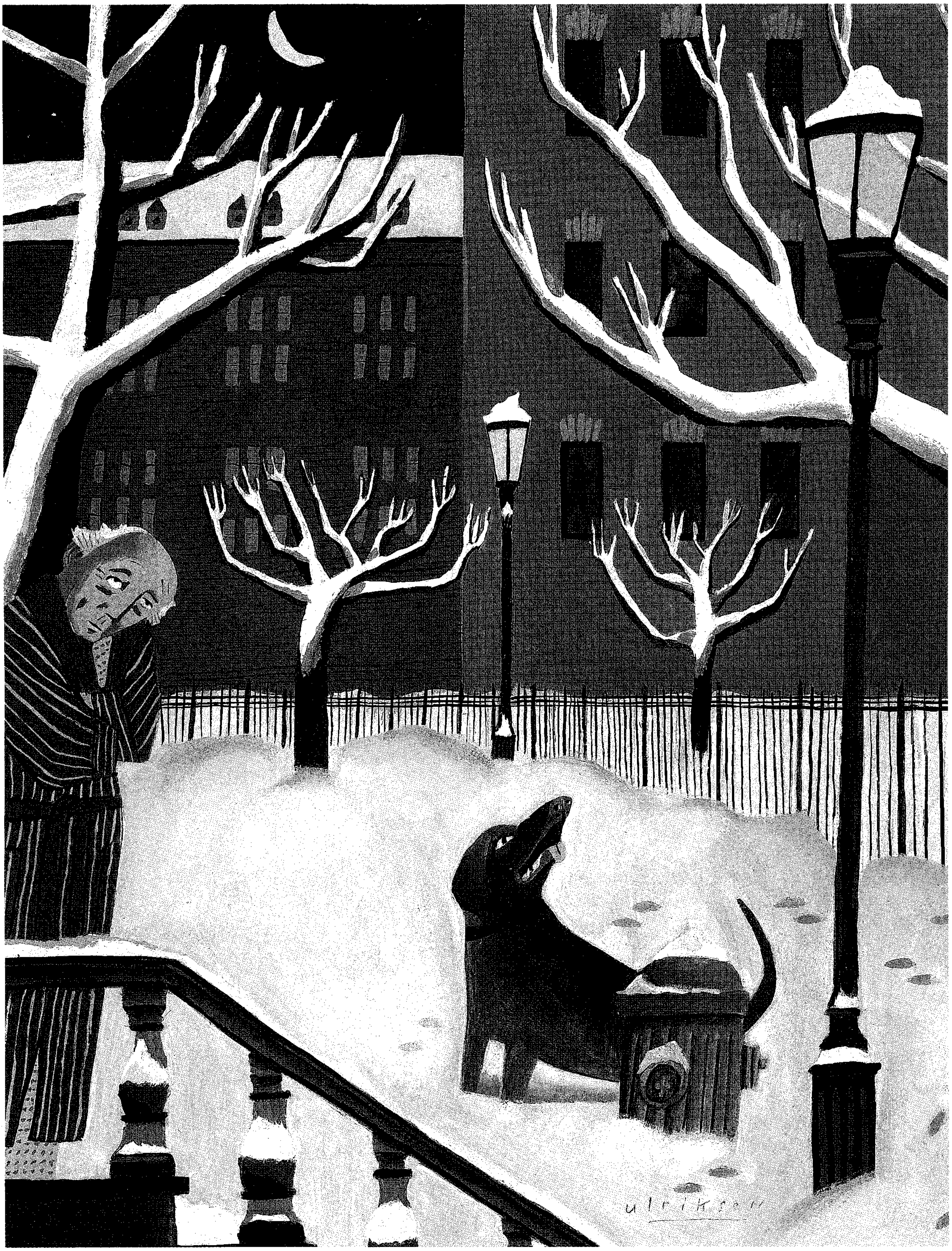
This is all she has. Her connection with the cottage where Brian lies now asleep or not asleep is broken. Also her connection with the house that has been an expression of her life with Brian, of the way they wanted to live. She has cut herself off from all the large solid acquisitions, like the washer and dryer and the oak table and the refinished wardrobe and the chandelier that is a copy of the one in a painting by Vermeer. And just as much from those things that were particularly hers—the pressed-glass tumblers that she had been collecting and the prayer rug that was probably not authentic, but beautiful. Especially from those things. The skirt and blouse and sandals she put on for the trip to Campbell River might as well be all she has now to her name. She would never go back to lay claim to anything. If Brian got in touch with her to ask what was to be done with things, she would tell him to do what he liked—throw everything into garbage bags and take it to the dump, if that was what he liked. (In fact she knows that he will probably pack up a trunk, which he does, sending on, scrupulously, not only her winter coat and boots but things like the waist cincher she wore at her wedding and never since, with the prayer rug draped on top of everything like a final statement of his generosity, either natural or calculated.)

She believes that she will never again care about what sort of rooms she lives in or what sort of clothes she puts on. She will not be looking for that sort of help to give anybody an idea of who she is, what she is like. Not even to give herself an idea. What she has done will be enough, it will be the whole thing.

What she has done will be what she has heard about and read about. It will be what Anna Karenina did and what Mme. Bovary wanted to do. And what a teacher at Brian's school did, with the school secretary. He ran off with her. That was what it was called. Running off with. Taking off with. It was spoken of disparagingly, humorously, enviously. It was adultery taken one step further. The people who did it had almost certainly been having an

ARTIST'S SKETCHBOOK BY MARK ULRIKSEN

IN THE WEE SMALL HOURS



affair already, committing adultery for quite some time before they became desperate or courageous enough to take this step. Once in a long while a couple might claim their love was unconsummated and technically pure, but these people would be thought of—if anybody believed them—as being not only very serious and high-minded but almost devastatingly foolish, almost in a class with those who gave up everything to go and work in some poor and dangerous country.

The others, the adulterers, were seen as irresponsible, immature, selfish, or even cruel. Also lucky. They were lucky because the sex they had been having in parked cars or the long grass or in each other's sullied marriage beds or most likely in motels like this one must surely have been splendid. Otherwise they would never have got such a yearning for each other's company at all costs or such a faith that their shared future would be altogether better and different in kind from what they had in the past.

Different in kind. That is what Pauline must believe now—that there is this major difference in lives or in marriages or unions between people. That some of them have a necessity, a fatefulness about them, which others do not have. Of course she would have said the same thing a year ago. People did say that, they seemed to believe that, and to believe that their own cases were all of the first, the special kind, even when anybody could see that they were not.

It is too warm in the room. Jeffrey's body is too warm. Conviction and contentiousness seem to radiate from it, even in sleep. His torso is thicker than Brian's, he is pudgier around the waist. More flesh on the bones, yet not so slack to the touch. Not so good-looking in general—she is sure most people would say that. And not so fastidious. Brian in bed smells of nothing. Jeffrey's skin, every time she's been with him, has had a baked-in, slightly oily or nutty smell. He didn't wash last night—but, then, neither did she. There wasn't time. Did he even have a toothbrush with him? She didn't, but she had not known she was staying.

When she met Jeffrey here it was still in the back of her mind that she had to concoct some colossal lie to serve her when she got home. And she—they—had to hurry. When Jeffrey said to her that he had decided that they must stay together, that she would come with him to Washington State, that they would have to drop the play because things would be too difficult for them in Victoria, she had looked at him just in the blank way you'd look at somebody the moment that an earthquake started. She was ready to tell him all the reasons why this was not possible, she still thought she was going to tell him that, but her life was coming adrift in that moment. To go back would be like tying a sack over her head.

All she said was "Are you sure?"

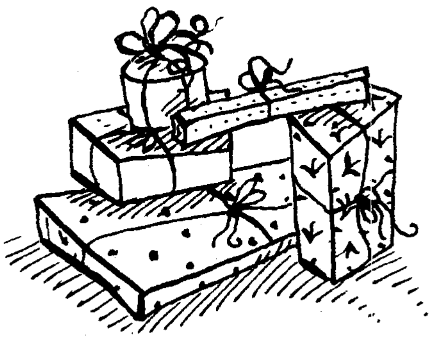
He said, "Sure." He said sincerely, "I'll never leave you."

That did not seem the sort of thing that he would say. Then she realized he was quoting—maybe ironically—from the play. It was what Orphée says to Eurydice within a few moments of their first meeting in the station buffet.

So her life was falling forward, she was becoming one of those people who ran away. A woman who shockingly and incomprehensibly gave everything up. For love, observers would say wryly. Meaning, for sex. None of this would happen if it weren't for sex.

And yet what's the great difference there? It's not such a variable procedure, in spite of what you're told. Skins, motions, contact, results. Pauline isn't a woman from whom it's difficult to get results. Brian got them. Probably anybody would, who wasn't wildly inept or morally disgusting.

But nothing's the same, really. With Brian—especially with Brian, to whom she has dedicated a selfish sort of good will, with whom she's lived in married complicity—there can never be this stripping away, the inevitable flight, the feelings she doesn't have to strive for but only to give in to like breathing or dying. That she believes can only come when the skin is on Jeffrey, the motions made by Jeffrey, and the weight that bears down on her has Jeffrey's heart in it, also his habits, thoughts, peculiarities, his ambition and loneliness (that for all she knows may have mostly to do with his youth).



For all she knows. There's a lot she doesn't know. She hardly knows anything about what he likes to eat or what music he likes to listen to or what role his mother plays in his life (no doubt a mysterious but important one, like the role of Brian's parents). One thing she's pretty sure of: whatever preferences or prohibitions he has will be definite. Plates in his armor.

She slides out from under Jeffrey's hand and from under the top sheet, which has a harsh smell of bleach, slips down to the floor where the bedspread is lying and wraps herself quickly in that rag of greenish-yellow chenille. She doesn't want him to open his eyes and see her from behind and note the droop of her buttocks. He's seen her naked before, but generally in a more forgiving moment.

She rinses her mouth and washes herself, using the bar of soap that is about the size of two thin squares of chocolate and firm as stone. She's hard used between the legs, swollen and stinking. Urinating takes an effort and it seems she's constipated. Last night when they went out and got hamburgers she found she could not eat. Presumably she'll learn to do all these things again, they'll resume their natural importance in her life. At the moment it's as if she can't quite spare the attention.

She has some money in her purse. She has to go out and buy a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo. Also vaginal jelly. Last night they used condoms the first two times but nothing the third time.

She didn't bring her watch and Jeffrey doesn't wear one. There's no clock in the room, of course. She thinks it's early—there's still an early look to the light in spite of the heat. The stores probably won't be open, but there'll be someplace where she can get coffee.

Jeffrey has turned onto his other side. She must have wakened him, just for a moment.

They'll have a bedroom. A kitchen, an address. He'll go to work. She'll go to the laundromat. Maybe she'll go to work, too. Selling things, waiting on tables, tutoring students. She knows French and Latin—do they teach French and Latin in American high schools? Can you get a job if you're not an American? Jeffrey isn't.

PLAGIARISM
HISTO
BARGAIN B
Joseph Farris

She leaves him the key. She'll have to wake him to get back in. There's nothing to write a note with, or on.

It is early. The motel is on the highway at the north end of town, beside the bridge. There's no traffic yet. She scuffs back and forth under the cottonwood trees at the edge of the lot for quite a while before a vehicle of any kind rumbles over the bridge—though the traffic on it shook their bed regularly late into the night.

Something is coming now. A truck. But not just a truck—there's a large bleak fact coming at her. And it has not arrived out of nowhere—it's been waiting, cruelly nudging at her ever since she woke up or even all night.

Caitlin and Mara.

Last night on the phone, after speaking in such a flat and controlled and almost agreeable voice—as if he prided himself on not being shocked, not objecting or pleading—Brian cracked open. He said with contempt and fury and no concern for whoever might hear him, "Well, then—what about the kids?"

The receiver began to shake against Pauline's ear.

She said, "We'll talk—" but he did not seem to hear her.

"The children," he said, in this same shivering and vindictive voice. Changing the word "kids" to "children" was like slamming a board down on her—a heavy, formal, righteous threat.

"The children stay," Brian said. "Pauline. Did you hear me?"

"No," said Pauline. "Yes. I heard you, but—"

"All right. You heard me. Remember. The children stay."

It was all he could do. To make her see what she was doing, what she was ending, and to punish her if she did so. Nobody would blame him. There might be finagling, there might be bargaining, there would certainly be humbling of herself, but there it was, like a round cold stone in her gullet, like a cannonball. And it would remain there unless she changed her mind entirely. The children stay.

Their car—hers and Brian's—is still sitting in the motel parking lot. Brian will have to ask his father or his mother to drive him up here today to get it. She has the keys in her purse. There are spare keys—he will surely bring them. She unlocks the car door and throws her keys on the seat, then locks the door from the inside and shuts it.

Now she can't go back. She can't get into the car and drive back and say that she'd been insane. If she did that he would forgive her but he'd never get over it and neither would she. They'd go on, though, as people did.

She walks out of the parking lot, she walks along the sidewalk, into town.

The weight of Mara on her hip yesterday. The sight of Caitlin's footprints on the floor.

Paw. Paw.

She doesn't need the keys to get back to them, she doesn't need the car. She could beg a ride on the highway. Give in, give in, get back to them any way at all—how can she not do that?

A sack over her head.

This is acute pain. It will become chronic. Chronic means that it will be permanent but perhaps not constant. It may also mean that you won't die of it. You won't get free of it but you won't die of it. You won't feel it every minute but you won't spend many days without it, either. And you'll learn some tricks to dull it or banish it or else you'll end up destroying what you've got. What you incurred this pain to get. It isn't his fault. He's still an innocent or a savage, who doesn't know there's a pain so durable in the world. Say to yourself, You lose them anyway. They grow up. For a mother there's always waiting this private, slightly ridiculous desolation. They'll forget this time, in one way or another they'll disown you. Or hang around till you don't know what to do about them, the way Brian has.

And, still, what pain. To carry along and get used to until it's only the past you're grieving for and no longer any possible present.

HER children have grown up. They don't hate her. For going away or staying away. They don't forgive her, either. Perhaps they wouldn't have forgiven her anyway, but it would have been about something different.

Caitlin remembers a little about the summer at the Lodge, Mara nothing. Caitlin calls it "that place Grandma and Grandpa stayed at."

"The place we were at when you went away," she says. "Only we didn't know you went away with the man who was Orphée."

Pauline has told them about the play.

Pauline says, "It wasn't Orphée."

"It wasn't Orphée? Oh, well. I thought it was."

"No."

"Who was it, then?"

"Just a man connected," says Pauline. "It wasn't him." ♦

PORTFOLIO

READING ROOM

It's easy to see why artists depict readers so often. They sit still, for one thing, and if you snap a picture or make a quick sketch of them in the subway they are, by and large, oblivious. Other, less pragmatic reasons—the contemplative cast of the features, the way the mood of a book (or a letter or a magazine) settles onto a body—may account for the vast catalogue of prints, drawings, watercolors, photographs, and paintings of readers but not for why Donald Oresman owns so many of them.

"I follow a rigorous policy: if I buy something framed, I hang it on the wall, and if I buy something unframed I stick it under the bed," Oresman says in reference to the seven hundred-odd works he amassed during his tenure as a corporate lawyer at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett and in the upper adminisphere of Paramount Communications. Then, for a moment, he sets aside the recreational gruffness of the retired attorney: "My wife and I were always collectors in a kind of hit-or-miss way. Some years ago, we bought a lithograph by Jim Dine of his wife, Nancy, reading. Then, a few weeks later, we saw an equally marvellous Larry Rivers, of the poet Frank O'Hara reading, and we bought that, too, and then—since I tend to be orderly rather than hit or miss—we decided we would concentrate on images of people reading."

Oresman has his favorite eras—the collection is particularly strong in work from the twenties, the thirties, and the forties—and his marked disinclinations. ("Once you get into the Abstract Expressionist period—well, obviously, they may have done readers but I have trouble recognizing them.") Yet the impetus behind his choices is unmistakable: he is a voluminous reader himself (leaning particularly toward Cavafy, Brecht, and Lampedusa), and the greater part of the works on display in the Oresmans' apartment hang in the library. "'There's a fierce privacy to reading,'" he says, quoting George Steiner, and he adds, "When you read, everything else is shut out."

—Kevin Conley

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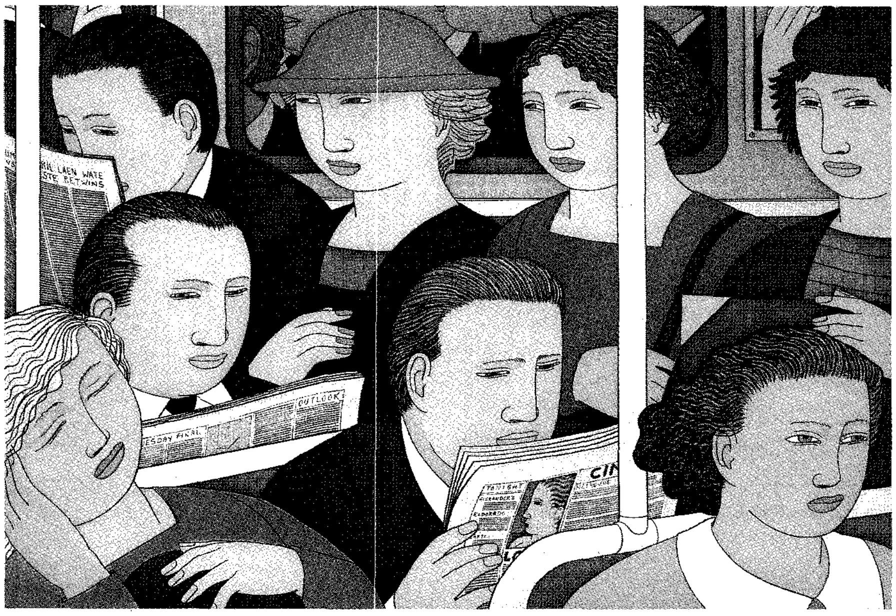
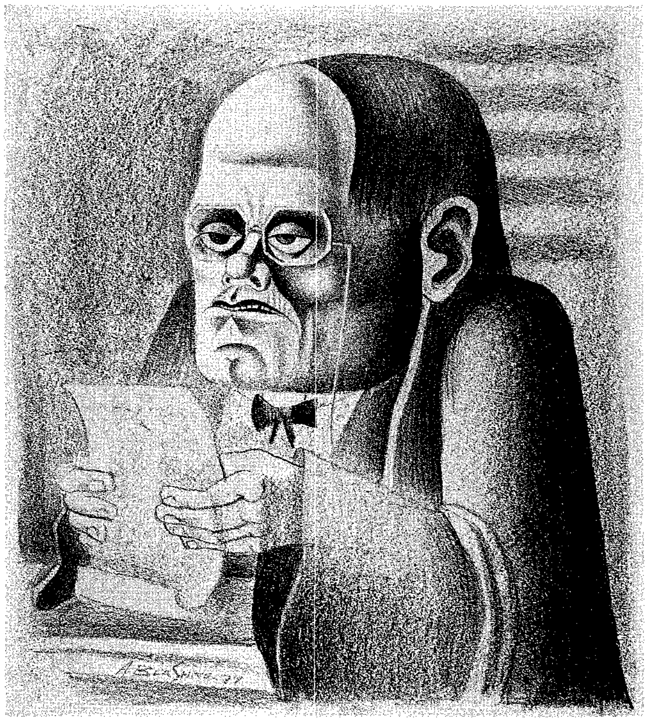
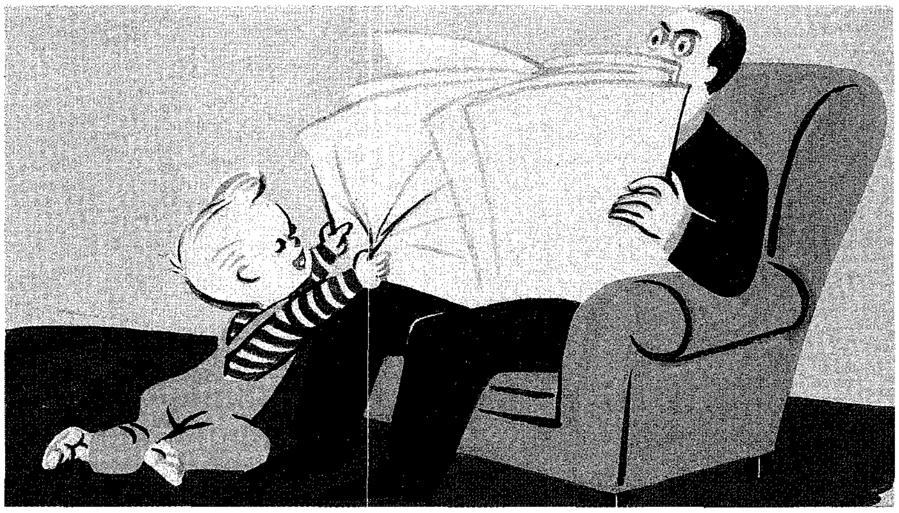
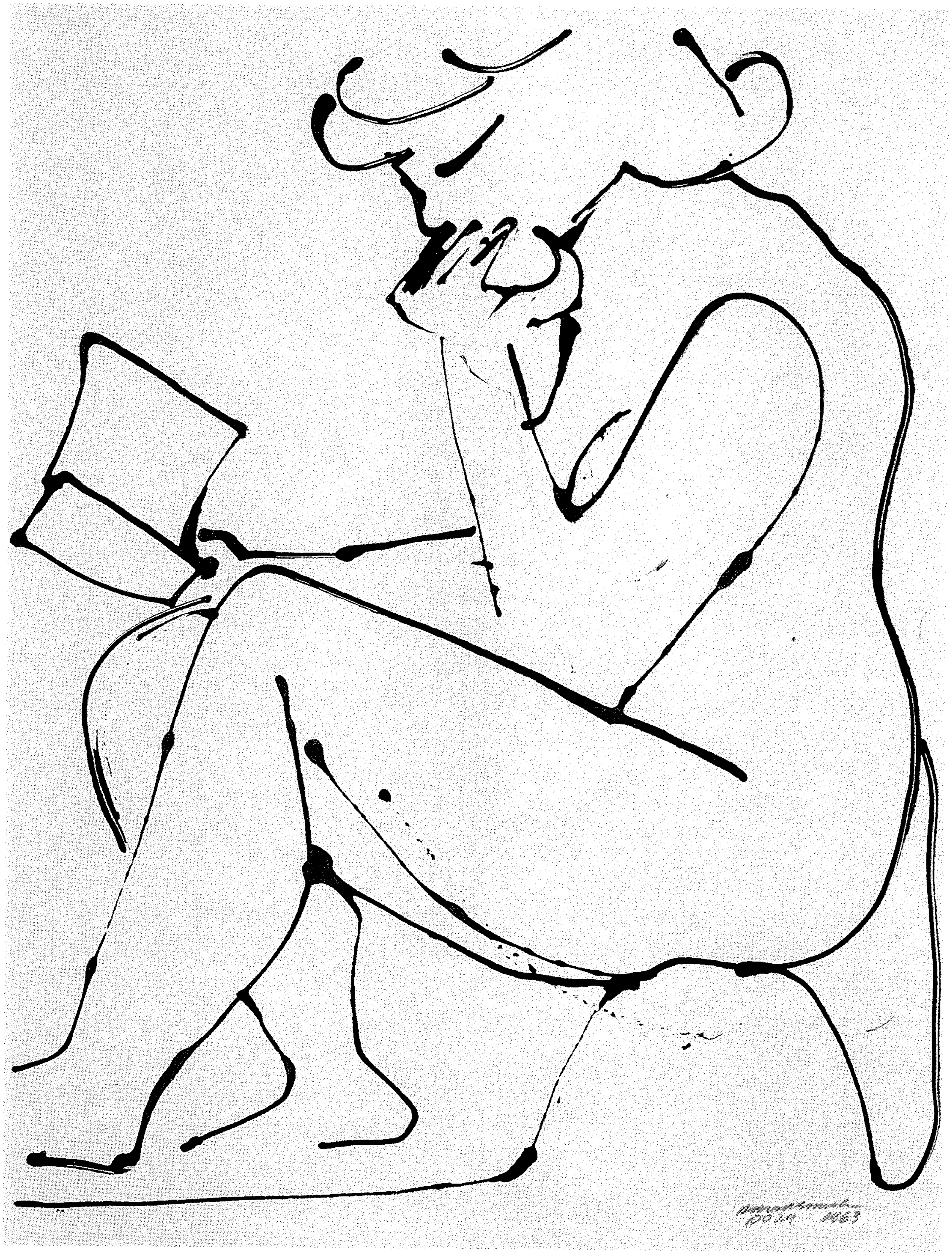






This page, top to bottom: "8 A.M.," by Andrew Stevovich; "Judge Reading," by Abe Blashko; and "My Mother Says," by Lucille Corcos. Opposite page: "Untitled," by David Smith.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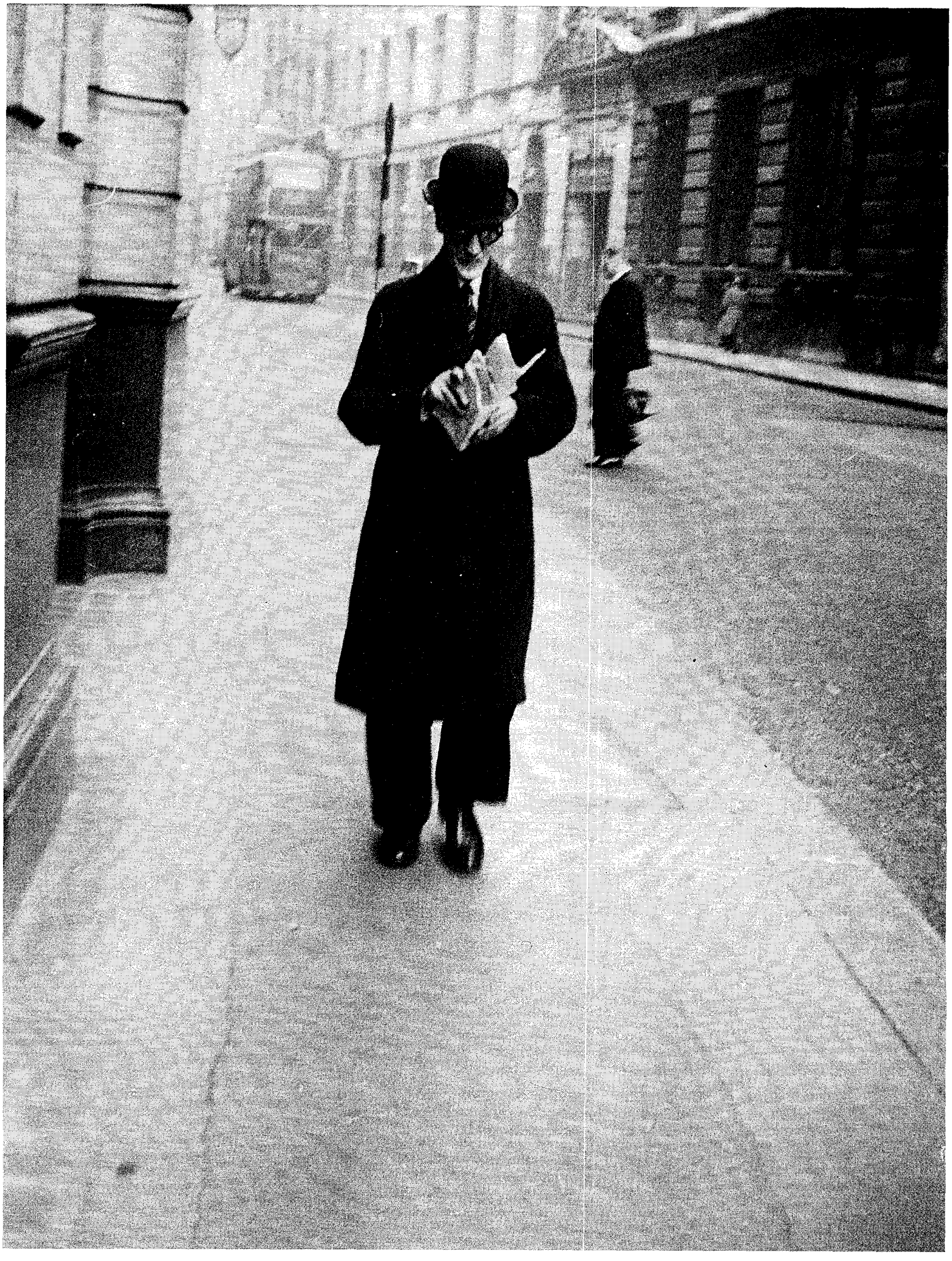

Further selections from the collection of Donald Oresman: "London Banker," by Robert Frank.

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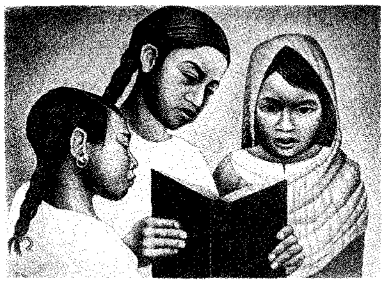
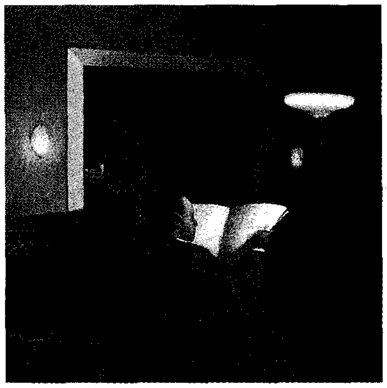
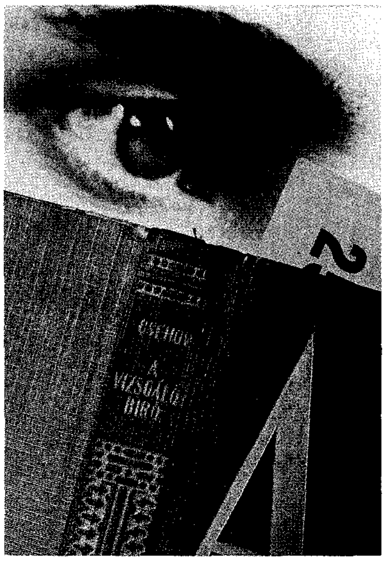
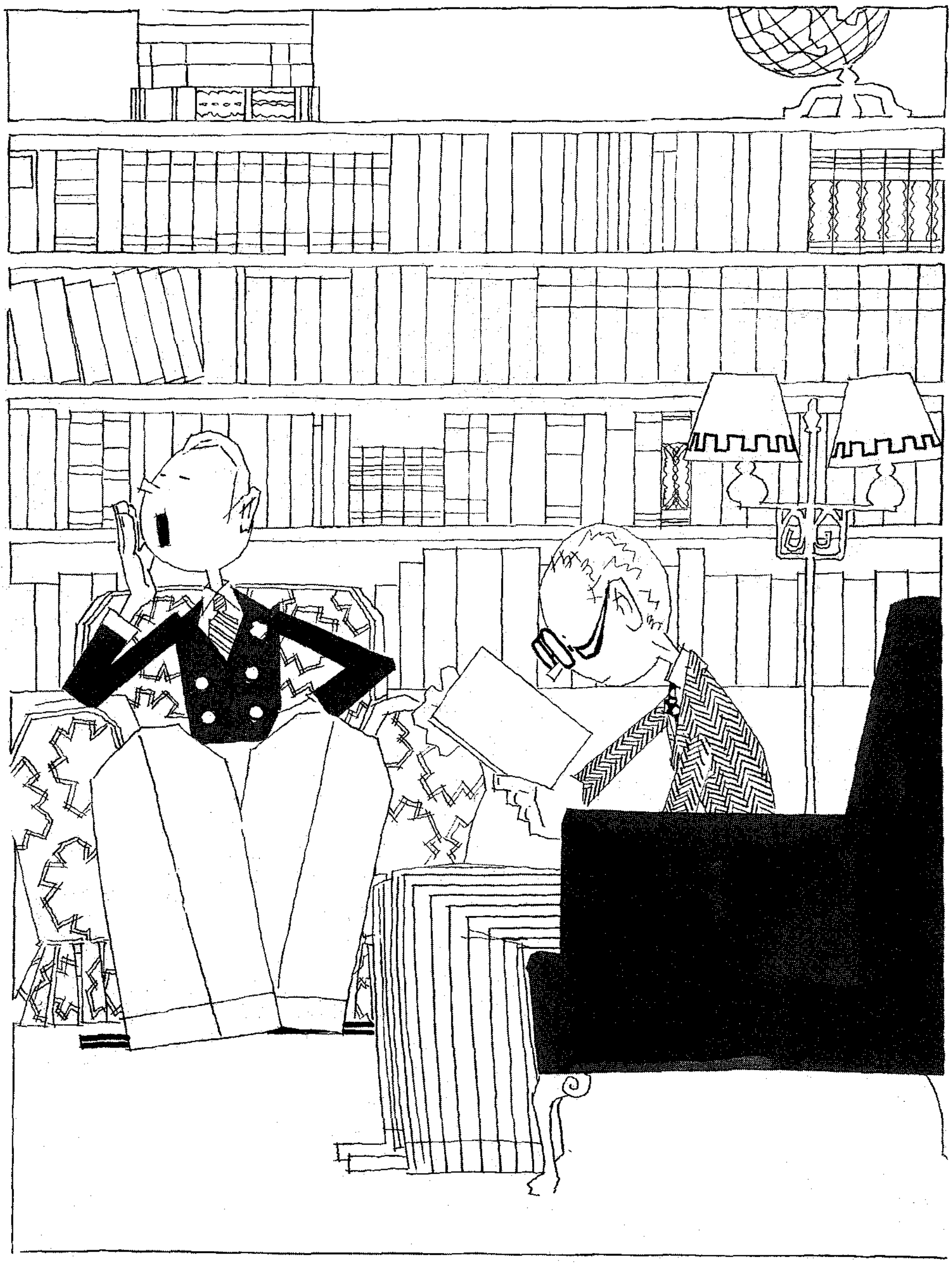
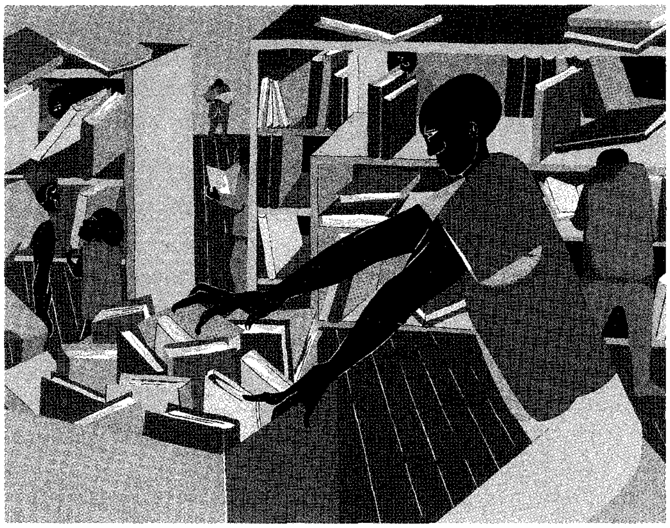


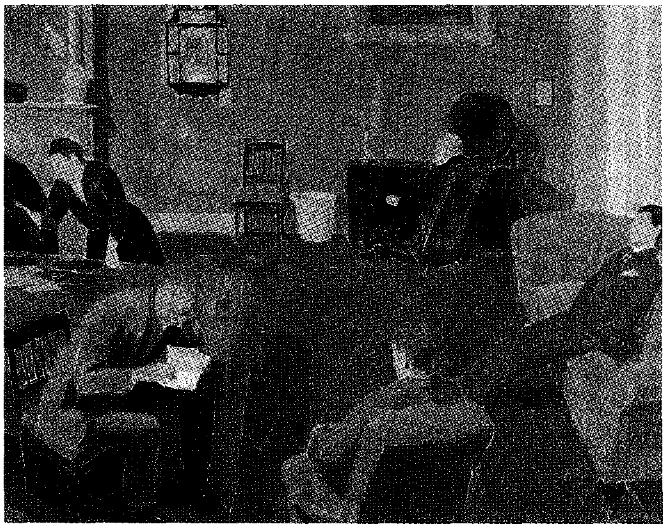






Clockwise from top left: "Lectura," by Elizabeth Catlett; "The Highbrow," by John Held, Jr.; "The Gramophone," by Henry Lamb; "The Library," by Jacob Lawrence; "13 Clues to a Fictitious Crime," by Mari Mahr; and a study for "Absence," by Christian Vincent.



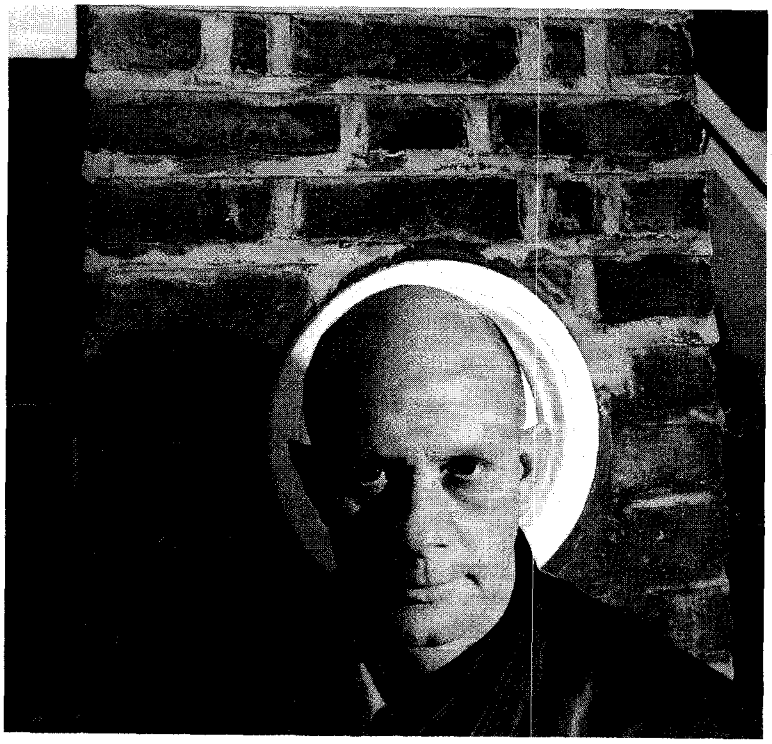


FICTION

SERIAL NICE GUY

London, it turns out, has thousands of sad, beautiful, Julie Christie-like waifs just waiting for the right man to call.

BY NICK HORNBY



The author, photographed by Dudley Reed, in Highbury, North London, just up the street from the Arsenal football ground. Hornby's first book, "Fever Pitch," was an autobiography about being a lifelong Arsenal fan.

How cool was Will Leitmann? This cool: In the last three months he had slept with a woman he didn't know very well (five points). He had spent more than three hundred pounds on a jacket (five points). He had spent more than twenty pounds on a haircut (five points). Was it possible to spend less than twenty pounds on a haircut in 1993? He owned more than five hip-hop albums (five points). He had taken Ecstasy (five points), but in a club and not merely at home as a sociological exercise (five bonus points). He intended to vote Labour at the next general election (five points). He earned more than forty thousand pounds a year (five points), and he didn't have to work very hard for it (five points, and he awarded himself an extra five points for not having to work at all). He had eaten in a restaurant that served polenta and shaved Parmesan (five points). He had never used a flavored condom (five points), he had sold his Bruce Springsteen albums (five points), and he had both grown a goatee (five points) and shaved it off again (five points). The bad news was that he hadn't ever had sex with someone who had appeared on the style page of a newspaper or magazine (minus two points), and he still thought, if he was honest (and if Will had anything approaching an ethical belief it was that lying about yourself in questionnaires was utterly wrong), that owning a fast car was likely to impress women. Even so, that gave him... seventy-three! He was, according to the questionnaire, subzero. He was dry ice! He was Frosty the Snowman! He would die of hypothermia!

He closed the magazine and added it to a pile of similar magazines that he kept in the bathroom. He didn't save them all, because he bought too many for that, but he wouldn't be throwing this one out in a hurry.

Clutter. Will's friend John's house was full of it. John and Christine had two children—the second had been born just last week, and Will had been summoned to look at it—and their place was, Will couldn't help thinking, a disgrace. Pieces of brightly colored plastic all over the floor, videotapes out of their cases near the TV set, the white throw blanket over the sofa looking as if it had been used as a piece of gigantic toilet paper, although Will preferred to think that the stains were chocolate... How could people live like this?

Christine came in holding the new baby while John was in the kitchen making him a cup of tea. "This is Imogen," she said.

"Oh," said Will. "Right." What was he supposed to say next? He knew there was something, but he couldn't remember what it was. "She's..." No. It had gone. He concentrated his conversational efforts on Christine. "How are you, anyway, Chris?"

"Oh, you know. A bit washed out."

"Been burning the candle at both ends?"

"No. Just had a baby."

"Oh, right." Everything came back to the sodding baby.

John came in with a tray and three mugs of tea.

"Barney's gone to his grandma's today," he said, for no reason that Will could see.

"How is Barney?" Barney was two, that was how Barney was, and therefore of no interest to anyone apart from his parents.

"He's fine, thanks," said John. "He's a right little devil at the moment, mind you, and he's not too sure what to make of Imogen, but... he's lovely."

Will had met Barney before, and knew for a fact he wasn't lovely.

"What about you, anyway, Will?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Any desire for a family of your own yet?"

I would rather eat one of Barney's dirty diapers, he thought. "Not yet," he said.

"You are a worry to us," said Christine.

"I'm O.K. as I am, thanks."

"Maybe," said Christine smugly. These two were beginning to make him feel a little ill. It was bad enough that they had children; why did they then wish to compound the error by encouraging their friends to have some as well?

"We were wondering," said John, "whether you'd like to be Imogen's godfather." The two of them sat there with an expectant smile, as if Will were about to leap to his feet, burst into tears, and wrestle them to the carpet in a euphoric embrace. He laughed nervously.

"Godfather? Church and things? Adoption if you're killed in an air crash?"

"Yeah."

"You're kidding."

"We've always thought you had hidden depths," said John.

"Ah, but you see I haven't. I really am this shallow."

They were still smiling. They weren't getting it.

"Listen. I'm touched that you asked. But I can't think of anything worse. Seriously. It's just not my sort of thing."

A couple of weeks later, Will met Angie and became a temporary stepfather for the first time.

WILL first saw Angie in Championship Vinyl, a little record shop off Holloway Road. He was browsing, trying to hunt down an old R. & B. anthology he used to own when he was younger, one of those he had loved and lost; he heard her tell the surly and depressive assistant that she was looking for a Pinky and Perky record for her niece. Will was trawling through the racks, so he never saw her face, but he glimpsed a lot of honey-blond hair, and heard the kind of vaguely husky voice that he and everyone else thought of as sexy, so he listened while she explained that her niece didn't even know who Pinky and Perky were. "Fancy being five and not knowing who Pinky and Perky are!"

Jollity was frowned upon in Championship Vinyl, and she was, as Will knew she would be, met with a withering look of contempt and a mumble that indicated she was wasting the assistant's valuable time.

Two days later, he found himself sitting next to the same woman in a café on Upper Street. He recognized her voice, the blond hair, and her denim jacket. They both got up to get one of the café's newspapers—she took the *Guardian*, so he was left with the *Mail*—and he smiled, but she clearly didn't recognize him and he would have left it at that if she hadn't been so pretty.

"I like Pinky and Perky," he said in what he hoped was a humorously patronizing tone, but he could see immediately that she didn't have the faintest idea what he was talking about.

She smiled nervously and glanced across at the waiter, probably calculating how long it would take for him to throw Will to the floor if she screamed loudly enough.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you were someone else." He blushed, and the blush seemed to relax her. They returned to their newspapers, but the woman kept breaking into a smile and looking across at him.

"I know this sounds nosy," she said eventually, "but I've got to ask you. Who did you think I was?"

So he explained, and she laughed again, and then finally he was given a chance to start over and converse normally. They talked about the record shop, and Pinky and Perky and other children's television characters. He had never before attempted to start a relationship cold in this way, but by the time they had finished their second cappuccino he had a phone number and a date for dinner.

When they met again, she told him about her kid straightaway; he wanted to throw his napkin on the floor, push the table over, and run.

"So?" he said. It was the right thing to say.

"I just thought you ought to know. It makes a difference to some people."

"In what way?"

"It's just that . . . if this is a date date—and it feels like one to me—then I thought I ought to tell you."

"Thank you. But, really, it's no problem. I would have been disappointed if you didn't have children."

She laughed. "Disappointed? Why?"

This was a good question. Why? Obviously he had said it because he thought it sounded smooth and winning, but he couldn't tell her that.

"Because I've never been out with someone who was a mum before, and I've always wanted to. I think I'd be good at it."

"Good at what?"

Right. Good at what? What was he good at? This was the million-dollar question.

"I don't know. Good at kids' things. Messing-about things."

He must be, surely. Everyone was, weren't they? Maybe he should have been working with kids all along. Maybe this was a turning point! It had to be said that Angie's beauty was not irrelevant to his decision to reassess his affinity with children. The long blond hair, he now knew, was accompanied by a calm, open face, big blue eyes, and extraordinarily sexy crow's-feet—she was beautiful in a very wholesome, Julie Christie-type way. And that was the point. People who looked like Julie Christie didn't go out with people like him. They went out with other film stars, or peers of the realm, or Formula One drivers. What was happening here? He decided that children were what was happening here; that children served as a symbolic blemish, like a birthmark or obesity, which gave him a chance where previously there would have been none. Maybe children democratized beautiful single women.

"I'll tell you," Angie was saying, "when you're a single mother, you're far more likely to end up thinking in feminist clichés. You know, all men are bastards, a woman without a man is like a . . . a . . . something without a something that doesn't have any relation to the first something. All that stuff."

"I'm sure," said Will sympathetically. He was getting excited now. If single mothers really thought that all men were bastards, then he could clean up. He could go out with women who looked like Julie Christie forever. He nodded and frowned and pursed his lips while Angie ranted, and he plotted his new, life-changing strategy.

FOR the next few weeks, he was Will the Good Guy, Will the Redeemer, and he loved it. It was effortless, too. Joe, the three-year-old, took to him almost at once, mostly because during their first meeting Will held him upside down by his ankles. That was all it took. He wished that relationships with proper human beings were that easy.

They went to McDonald's. They went to the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum. They went on a boat down the river. On the very few occasions when he had thought about the possibility of children (only when he was drunk and in the throes of a new relationship), he had convinced himself that fatherhood would be a sentimental photo opportunity, and fatherhood Angie style was exactly like that: He could walk hand in hand with a beautiful woman, with a child gambolling happily in front of him, and when he had done it for an afternoon he could go home again if he wanted to.

And then there was the sex. Sex with a single mother, Will decided after his first night with Angie, beat the sex he was used to hands down. If you picked the right woman, someone who'd been messed about and eventually abandoned by the father of her children, and who hadn't met anyone since (because the kids stopped you going out, and, anyway, a lot of men didn't like kids who didn't belong to them)... if you picked one of these, then she loved you for it. All of a sudden you became better: better-looking, a better lover, a better person.

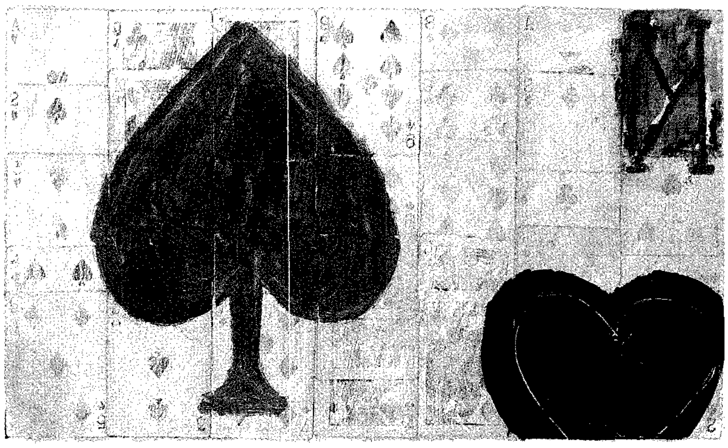
As far as he could see, it was an entirely happy arrangement. All those so-so couplings going on in the world of the childless singles, to whom a night in a foreign bed was just another fuck... they didn't know what they were missing. Sure, there were right-on people, men and women, who would be repelled and appalled by his logic, but that was fine by him. It reduced the competition.

Even the end, when it came, had an enormous amount to recommend it.

They had been going out for six weeks, and there were things he was beginning to find unsatisfactory. Angie wasn't very flexible, for a start, and the whole kid thing really got in the way sometimes. The week before, he had bought tickets for the new Mike Leigh film on the opening night, but she didn't make it to the cinema until thirty minutes after it had started, because the babysitter hadn't turned up. And she could never stay over at his place, so he always had to go round there, and she didn't have many CDs, and there was no VCR or satellite or cable, so on a Saturday night they always ended up watching "NYPD Blue" and a crap made-for-TV movie about some kid with a disease. He was just beginning

DEPT. OF CHRISTMAS EXPECTATIONS

CHRISTMAS CARDS



KAREN CALDICOTT

HOW strange it is—gut-wrenchingly strange—to realize that your parents, in a snapshot taken by memory, are younger not only than you now but than your own children. If I was seven or eight on a certain Christmas that I remember, my father would have been thirty-nine or forty, and my mother thirty-five or six. A couple of kids, really, living in her parents' house with their only child, in a Depression that war's excitement and mounting public debt hadn't yet lifted. The taste of Christmas in the little Pennsylvania town of Shillington—one of the more penetrating in my life's bolted meals—was compounded of chocolate-flavored piety, as sweetly standardized as Hershey's Kisses, and a tart, refreshed awareness of where one stood on the socioeconomic scale.

Since at that latitude white Christmases were a rarity, the proper atmosphere had to be created within the front parlor: an evergreen tree more or less richly laden with decorations brought down from the attic; beneath the tree a "Christmas yard," a miniature landscape of cotton snow and mirror ponds and encircling railroad tracks; a heap of wrapped presents, which at my age of seven or eight had not yet quite shed the possibility, like a glaze, that an omniscient, fast-moving Santa Claus had personally deposited them. Though we had the tree, our neighbors' trees were in my impression bushier, pressing against the ceiling and crowding the front windows, and more sumptuously hung with reflective balls, colored lights, and glittering tinsel. We didn't bother with tinsel; my mother, I believe, found it vulgar and messy. Though we had the yard, with a lovable blue Lionel train—engine, coal car, and two or three passenger cars, going around and around in tooting obedience to a cubic black transformer—friends of mine, or friends of theirs, had entire basements dedicated to mountainous, suburbanized mazes of tracks, switchoffs, tunnels, and toy stations. Our yard had a single tunnel, through a papier-mâché mountain whose snowy crest was approached up green-sprayed sides diagonally dented by what I understood to be sheep paths. Our pond was square, and any illusion of landscape fomented by the toy cows and cottages on its cotton banks clashed with the reality of my own huge, freckled face looking up from it when I peeked in. Though we had the presents, they seemed less numerous and luxurious than presents bestowed up and down Philadelphia Avenue, in houses externally more modest than ours.

On the Christmas that I painfully remember, one of the presents was a double deck of playing cards in a pretty box, whose gray surface had a fuzzy texture, and whose paper drawer was pulled out by a silken tab. I had unwrapped the box and had assumed that it was for me until my father's voice, which was almost never raised to me in disapproval or correction, gently floated down from above with the suggestion that the cards were a present from him to my mother. This made sense: one of her habits—the most alarming habit she had, indeed—was to play solitaire at night at the dining table, under the stained-glass chandelier. "The weary gambler," she would intone theatrically, "stakes her all," as she doggedly laid out the cards in their rows. Now her voice descended to me, saying that the cards were for all of us to share; and it was true, we did play cards, three-handed pinochle, and the box said "PINOCHLE" on it. Nevertheless, I was humiliated, as deeply as only a child can be, to be caught trying to appropriate her present. At the same time, I thought that if there had been more presents I would not have made such a mistake. And I was afflicted by the paltriness of this present from my father to his wife. At least, I am afflicted now, or have been the hundreds or thousands of times I have remembered this incident. The something pathetic about our Christmases, the something that strived and failed to live up to Shillington's Noël ideal, was bared; a pang went through me that dyed the moment indelibly.

Some elemental, mournful triangle seems sketched: my grandparents, those distant, grave, friendly adjuncts, are absent from the room as I remember it. My parents are above me, the presents shorn of wrapping are around me, the three-rail Lionel tracks are by my knees, the tree with its resiny scent presses close. I have no memory of what I did receive that Christmas—the wooden skis, perhaps, with leather-strap bindings that never held, or a shiny children's classic that would stay unread. I feel, for a moment, the triangle flip: through the little velvety box of cards I see my parents in their poverty, their useless gentility, their unspoken plight of homelessness, their clinging to each other through such tokens, and through me. I become in my memory their parent, looking down and precociously grieving for them.

Captured in this recollection, I want to look out the window for relief, at the vacant lot next to our house, at the row houses opposite. If there was no white Christmas, there was at least a public Christmas, a free ten-o'clock cartoon show at the Shillington movie theatre, followed by a throng of us children lining up at the town hall to receive a box of chocolates from the hands of Sam Reich, the fat one of the three town policemen. I remember eating these chocolates, trying to avoid the ones with cherries at their centers, while walking up Philadelphia Avenue with the other children as they noisily boasted of their presents—I seeming to be, as one sometimes is in a dream, tongue-tied. —JOHN UPDIKE

to wonder whether Angie was what he was looking for when she decided to finish it.

They were in an Indian restaurant on Holloway Road.

"Will, I'm so sorry, but I'm not sure this is working out."

In the past, a conversation that began in this way usually meant that something had been found out, or that he had done something grotesquely insensitive, but he really thought that he had a clean sheet.

"It's not you. You've been great. It's me. Well, my situation, anyway."

"There's nothing wrong with your situation. Not as far as I'm concerned!"

"There are things you don't know. Things about Simon." Simon was her ex, who had problems with drink and work, and who, with a cavalier disregard for cliché, turned out to be screwing his secretary. "He's not very happy about me seeing somebody else. And I know how that sounds, but he just hasn't come to terms with us splitting up. And I'm not sure I have, either, more to the point. I'm not ready to launch into a relationship with anybody new yet."

"You've been doing pretty well."

"The tragedy is that I've met someone just right for me at precisely the wrong time. I should have started with a meaningless fling, not a . . . not with someone who . . ."

This, he couldn't help feeling, was ironic. If there was a man better equipped for the meaningless fling, he wouldn't like to meet him. I've been putting this on! he wanted to tell her. I'm much shallower than this, honest! But it was too late.

"I did wonder whether I was rushing you. I've really cocked this up, haven't I?"

"No, Will, not at all. You've been brilliant. I'm so sorry that . . ."

She was starting to get a little tearful, and he loved her for it. He had never watched a woman cry without feeling responsible, and he was rather enjoying the experience.

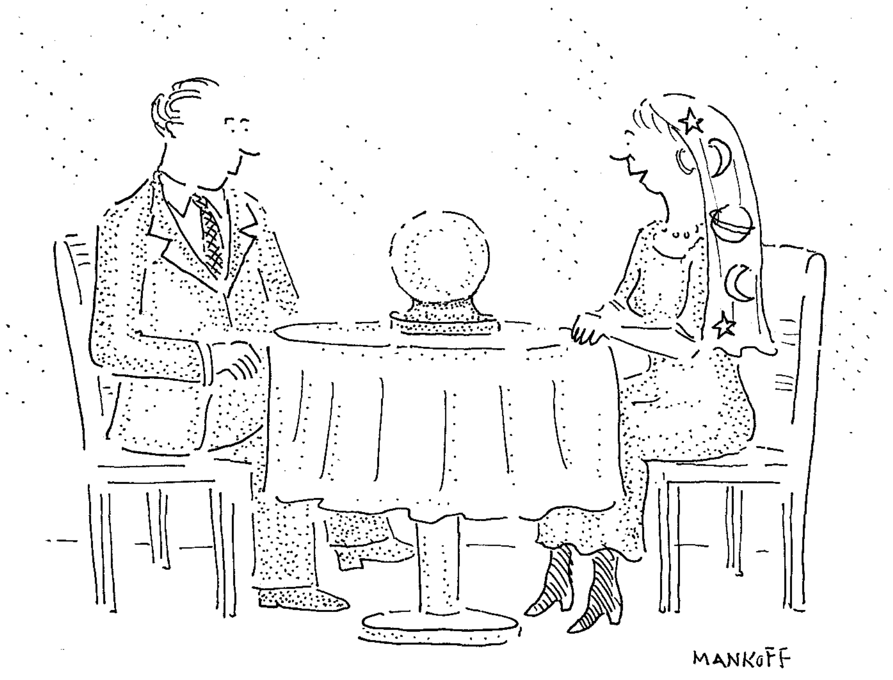
Of all the evenings he had spent with Angie, he loved this last one the best. This, for Will, was the clincher. He knew then that there would be other women like Angie—women who would start off by thinking that they wanted a regular fuck and end up deciding that a quiet life was worth any number of noisy orgasms. As he felt something not dissimilar, although for very different reasons, he knew he had a lot to offer. Great sex, a lot of ego massage, temporary parenthood without tears, and a guilt-free parting—what more could a man want? Single mothers—bright, attractive, available women, thousands of them, all over London—were the best invention Will had ever heard of. His career as a serial nice guy had begun.

II

"I'M a single father. I have a twelve-year-old boy. I'm a single father. I have a twelve-year-old boy." No matter how many times Will told himself this, he always found a reason that prevented him from believing it; in his own head—not the place that counted the most, but important nevertheless—he didn't feel like a parent. He was too young, too old, too stupid, too smart, too groovy, too impatient, too selfish, too careless, too careful (whatever the contraceptive circumstances of the woman he was seeing, he always, always used a Durex, even in the days before you had to), he didn't know enough about kids, he went out too often, he drank too much, he took too many drugs. When he looked in the mirror, he didn't, couldn't, see a dad, especially a single dad.

He was trying to see a single dad because he had run out of single mums to sleep with; in fact, Angie had so far proved to be both the beginning and the end of his supply. It was all very well deciding that single mums were the future, that there were millions of sad, Julie Christie-like waifs just dying for his call, but the frustrating truth was that he didn't have any of their phone numbers. Where did they hang out?

It took him a while to realize that, by definition, single mothers had children, and children, famously, prevented them from hanging out anywhere. He had made a few halfhearted inquiries of friends, but had failed to make any real headway; the people he knew either didn't know any single mothers or were unwilling to effect the necessary introductions, owing to Will's legendarily poor romantic track record. But then he found the ideal solution: he would appropriate Marcus, the weird twelve-year-old son of his friend Fiona, and join a single parents' group. SPAT (Single Parents—Alone Together) met on the first Thursday of the month



"In the future, everyone will have privacy for fifteen minutes."

• •

in a local adult-education center, and tonight was Will's first time. He was almost sure that it would be his last time, too: he'd get something wrong, like the name of Postman Pat's cat, or the color of Noddy's car, and he'd be exposed as a fraud and frog-marched off the premises.

There was only one woman in the room when he arrived. She was taking bottles—of white wine, beer, mineral water, and supermarket-brand cola—out of a cardboard box and putting them onto a table. The rest of the tables had been pushed to the back; the chairs were stacked in rows behind them. It was the most desolate party venue Will had ever seen.

"Have I come to the right place?" he asked the woman, who had pointy features and red cheeks.

"SPAT? Come in. Are you Will? I'm Frances."

He smiled and shook her hand. He had spoken to Frances on the phone earlier in the day.

"I'm sorry there's nobody else here yet. We quite often get off to a slow start. Babysitters."

"Of course." He was wrong to be so prompt. He had more or less given himself away already. And, of course, he should never have said "of course," which implied that she had clarified something he had found puzzling. He should have rolled his eyes and said, "Tell me about it," or "Don't talk to me about babysitters," something weary and conspiratorial.

Maybe it wasn't too late. He rolled his eyes. "Don't talk to me about babysitters," he said. He laughed bitterly and shook his head, just for good measure. Frances ignored the eccentric conversational timing and took the cue.

"Did you have trouble tonight, then?"

"No. He's staying with my mother." He was proud of the use of the pronoun. It implied familiarity. "I've had trouble before, though," he added hastily. The conversation was less than two minutes old and already he was a nervous wreck.

"Haven't we all?" said Frances.

Will laughed heartily. "Yes," he said.

It was now perfectly clear that he was either a liar or a lunatic, but before he could dig himself any deeper into a hole that was already shipping water other SPAT members—all of them women, all but one of them in their thirties—started to arrive. Frances introduced him. Sally and Moira, who looked tough, ignored him completely, helped themselves to a paper cupful of white wine, and disappeared off to the farthest corner of the room. (Moira, Will noted with interest, was wearing a Lorena Bobbitt T-shirt.) Helen and Susannah seemed to regard SPAT as beneath their dignity, and made rude comments about the wine and the location. Saskia was ten years younger than anybody else in the room, and looked more like somebody's daughter than somebody's mother. And Suzie was tall, blond, pale, nervy-looking, and beautiful. She would do, Will thought, and stopped looking at anyone else who came in. Blond and beautiful were two of the qualities he was looking for.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Will, I'm new, and I don't know anybody."

"Hello, Will. I'm Suzie, I'm old, and I know everybody." He laughed. She laughed.

His conversation with Frances had sharpened him up, so he did better on the Marcus front. In any case, Suzie wanted to talk, and he was extremely happy to listen. Suzie had been married to a man named Mark, who had started an affair when she was six months pregnant and had left her the day before she went into labor.

Suzie looked around the room.

"One of the reasons I like coming here is that you can be angry and no one thinks any the less of you," she said. "Just about everyone's got something they're angry about."

There were endless ingenious variations on the same theme. Men who took one look at their new child and went, men who took one look at their new colleague and went, men who went for the hell of it. Suddenly, Will found himself starting to understand Moira's sanctification of Lorena Bobbitt; by the time Suzie had finished her litany of treachery and deceit, he wanted to cut off his own penis with a kitchen knife.

He was becoming so depressed about his sex that he decided to redress the balance.

"So. I'm on my own," he said, in what he hoped was a mysteriously wistful tone.

"I'm sorry," said Suzie. "I haven't asked you anything about yourself."

"Oh . . . it doesn't matter."

"Did you get dumped, then?"

"Well. I suppose I did, yes." He gave her a sad, stoical smile.

"And does your ex see Marcus?"

"Sometimes. She's not really that bothered." He was beginning to feel better; it was good to be the bearer of bad news about women. True, this bad news was entirely fictitious, but there was, he thought, an emotional truth here somewhere, and he could see now that his role-playing had a previously unsuspected artistic element to it. He was acting, yes, but in the noblest, most profound sense of the word. He wasn't a fraud. He was Robert De Niro.

"How does he cope with that?"

"Oh . . . he's a good boy. Very brave."

"They have amazing resources, kids, don't they?"

To his astonishment he found himself blinking back a tear, and Suzie put a reassuring hand on his arm.

III

WILL fell in love on New Year's Eve, and the experience took him completely by surprise. She was called Rachel, she illustrated children's books, and she looked a little bit like Laura Nyro on the cover of "Gonna Take a Miracle"—glamorous, bohemian, clever, lots of long, unruly dark hair.

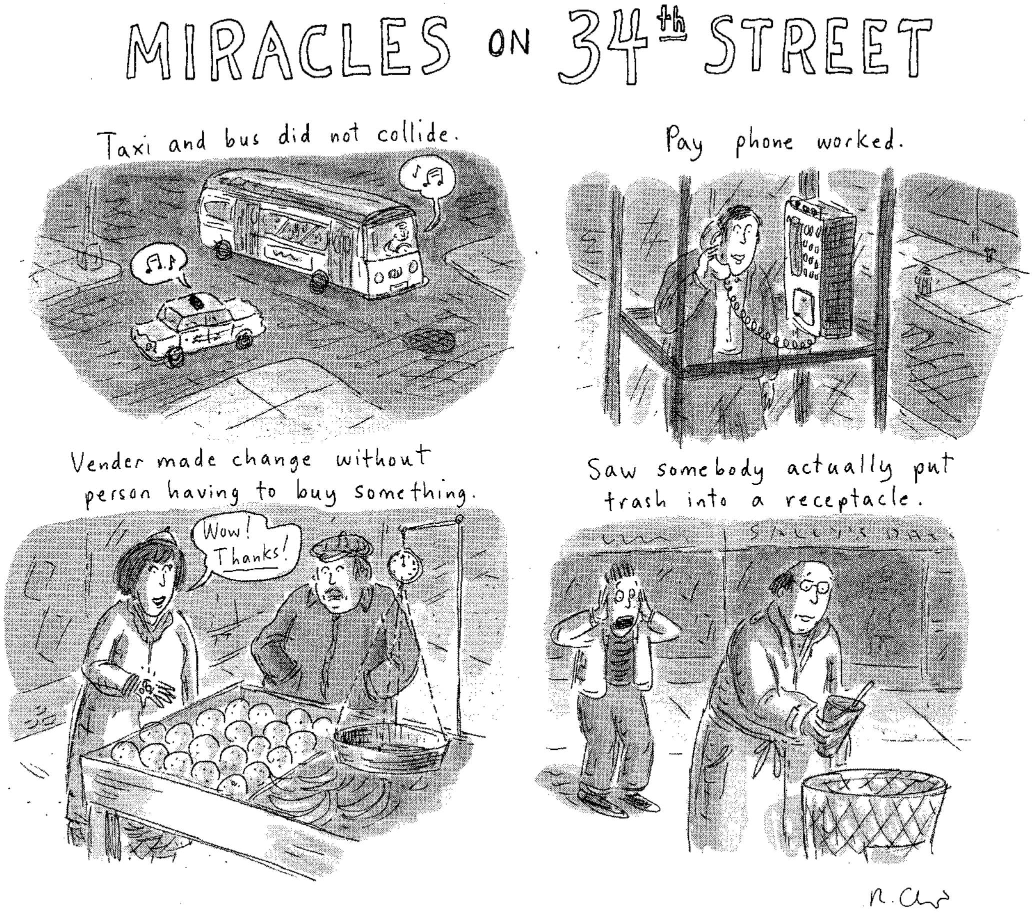
Will had never wanted to fall in love. When it had happened to friends it had always struck him as a peculiarly unpleasant experience, what with all the loss of sleep and weight, and the unhappiness when it was unreciprocated, and the suspect, dippy happiness when it was working out. Lots of people, of course, would be thrilled to take their seats next to their computer-generated ideal life-partner, but Will was a realist, and he could see immediately that there was only cause for panic. He was almost sure that Rachel was about to make him very miserable indeed, mostly because he couldn't see anything he might have that could possibly interest her.

If there was a disadvantage to the life he had chosen for himself, a life without care and difficulty and detail, a life without context and texture, then he had finally found it: when he met an intelligent, cultured, ambitious, beautiful, witty, and single woman at a New Year's Eve party, he felt like a blank twit, a cypher, someone who had done nothing his whole life apart from watch game shows and drive around listening to Nirvana records.

One of his problems, he reflected as he was trying to dredge his memory for a single tiny scrap of experience that this woman might regard as worth her momentary contemplation, was that he was reasonably good-looking and reasonably articulate. It gave people the wrong impression: it was all just a quirk of genetics, environment, and education; at his core he was ugly and monosyllabic. Maybe he should undergo some sort of reverse plastic surgery—something that would rearrange his features so that they were less even. Or maybe he should put on an enormous amount of weight, sprout a few extra chins, grow so fat that he sweated profusely all the time.

Because the thing was that when this Rachel woman sat down next to him at dinner she was interested, for the first five minutes, before she worked him out, and in that five minutes he got a glimpse of what life could be like if he were in any way interesting. On balance, he thought, he'd prefer not to have had that glimpse. What good did it do him, after all? He wasn't going to get to sleep with Rachel. He wasn't going to go to a restaurant with her, or see what her sitting room looked like, or get to understand how her father's affair with her mother's best friend had affected her views on having children. He hated that five-minute window of opportunity. In the end, he thought, he would be far happier if she turned around to look at him, just managed not to vomit, and turned her back on him for the rest of the evening.

For now, at least, Will had lost Rachel. She was talking to the person sitting on her other side. What could he do to reel her back in? He must have some talent or another which he could exaggerate and dramatize somehow. Cooking? He could cook a bit, but who couldn't? Maybe he was writing a novel and had forgotten about it. What had he been good at when he was at school? Spelling. It was hopeless. The most interesting thing about his life, he realized, was Marcus: Once Will had imagined that Marcus was his son for the SPAT meeting, Marcus had, for some reason, started visiting him, uninvited. After the fourth or fifth time, Will had found himself working Marcus into the


MIRACLES ON 34th STREET
Taxi and bus did not collide.
Pay phone worked.
Vender made change without person having to buy something.
Wow! Thanks!
Saw somebody actually put trash into a receptacle.
R. Chast

fabric of his day. This wasn't difficult to do, since the fabric of his day was tatty, and filled with any number of large and accommodating holes. And Marcus was so locked into himself, so oblivious of everyone and everything, that affection seemed to be the only possible response to him. "Sorry to butt in, Rachel, but I have this weird relationship with a twelve-year-old boy. Is that any good to you?" O.K., the material needed some work, but it was there, definitely. It just needed shaping. He vowed to bring up Marcus at the first available opportunity.

Rachel had noticed he wasn't talking to anyone, and wheeled around so that he could be included in a conversation about whether there was anything new under the sun, with particular reference to contemporary popular music. Rachel said that to her Nirvana sounded just like Led Zeppelin.

"I know a twelve-year-old who'd kill you for saying that," said Will. It wasn't true, of course. A couple of weeks ago, Marcus had thought that the lead singer of Nirvana played for Manchester United, so he was probably not yet at the stage where he wanted to annihilate people who accused the band of being derivative.

"So do I, come to that," said Rachel. "Maybe they should meet. What's yours called?"

He's not mine, exactly, he thought. "Marcus," he said.

"Mine's Ali. Alistair."

"Right."

"And is Marcus into skateboards and rap and 'The Simpsons' and so on?"

Will raised his eyes skyward and chuckled fondly, and the misapprehension was cast in concrete. It wasn't his fault, this conversation. He hadn't lied once in the entire minute and a half. He hadn't actually said that Marcus was his son. That was one hundred per cent her interpretation. Certainly over fifty per cent, anyway.

"And is Marcus's mother here tonight?"

"Ummm . . ." Will looked up and down the dinner table as if to remind himself one way or the other. "No." Not a lie! Marcus's mother was not there!

"You're not spending New Year's Eve with her?" Rachel was narrowing her eyes and looking down her nose to indicate that she knew this was a leading question.

"No. We, er, we don't live together." He'd really got the hang of this truth-telling business now, he felt. If anything,

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DEPT. OF CHRISTMAS PIG

WINTER IN MARTINIQUE

When I was a child, in Martinique, my mother, Ma Ninotte, kept pigs. They were little cochons-planches, fattened all year long and destined for the Christmas feast—a singsong time, filled with sausages, chops, pâtés, stews, and roasts. The pigs were fed on leftovers, green bananas, useless words, nicknames; they scarfed up the seasonal fruit peels, and we children lavished a kindly tenderness on them. Sometimes they escaped from the kitchen, which had become a pig park, and dashed into the streets of Fort-de-France. We could always catch them in less than an hour. In Fort-de-France, everyone knew how to corner a pig, and the countrywomen were able to stop them by calling out a single old word. Everyone knew, too, that a family's survival often depended on the skinniest, slightest little pig.

All pigs were different—some were more engaging or mischievous than others—and my brothers and sisters and I didn't love all of them equally. In our shared memory, though, there was Matador. He arrived a bag of rattling bones and turned into a charming monster who laughed at the world with the eyes of an old man. He loved chocolate, soup, loving scratches, and Creole songs. And he became huge. When he escaped into the city, he was like a rolling boulder. One kindly fellow who sought to corner him found himself driven into a pole. Others were dispatched into gutters. When Ma Ninotte, followed by her brat pack, caught up, one of Matador's victims asked her, "Tell us, Ma'am, what seventh species of animal is this, if you please?" Another said, "He's a sower of sores, a liver boiler, a rheumatism starter, a filth-maker, and, if you don't mind my saying so, Mrs. So-and-So, an ill-bred bastard of a beast." We finally rounded up Matador on the banks of the Pointe Simon, opposite the white man's warehouses, where he had stopped to suck down unceremoniously the scrumptious emanations of a salted-meat barrel.

As December approached, a parade of snivelling delegations implored Ma Ninotte to excuse Matador. Ma Ninotte responded, with a feigned rage (for she loved Matador as much as we did), "Tianmay soti en zèbe, muven"—"Get away from my feet, you brats."

A dog dressed as a man was the killer—a certain Marcel. He seemed to exist only as Christmas approached, when he became a pig slaughterer. We had become so attached to Matador that when the fellow appeared we greeted him with cries of hatred. He had brought no implements; he had come, as he did every year, to agree on a price, a day, and a time. He arrived by day, in his white visiting shirt. As usual, he called up from the first step, "Ma Ninotte, how'd the pig do this year?"

Then began a long wait, the most terrible of our childhood. December arrived, with its winds, cold drafts, swollen noses, upset stomachs, fitful coughs, and old flus. We remained vigilant. We counted the knives and the tubs, but Ma Ninotte seemed to be preparing a pigless Christmas. She tended to the peels of her orange liqueur. She prettied her salted ham, her conserves, the other delicacies she had accumulated in her cupboard while awaiting the days of joy. But we never heard her promise anyone even the smallest chop. The air was trimmed with scents from cake ovens and the steam of fricassees. We saw her buy neither the peppers nor the sack of onions nor the coarse salt nor the herbs that announced the evil Saturday of the fattened pig.

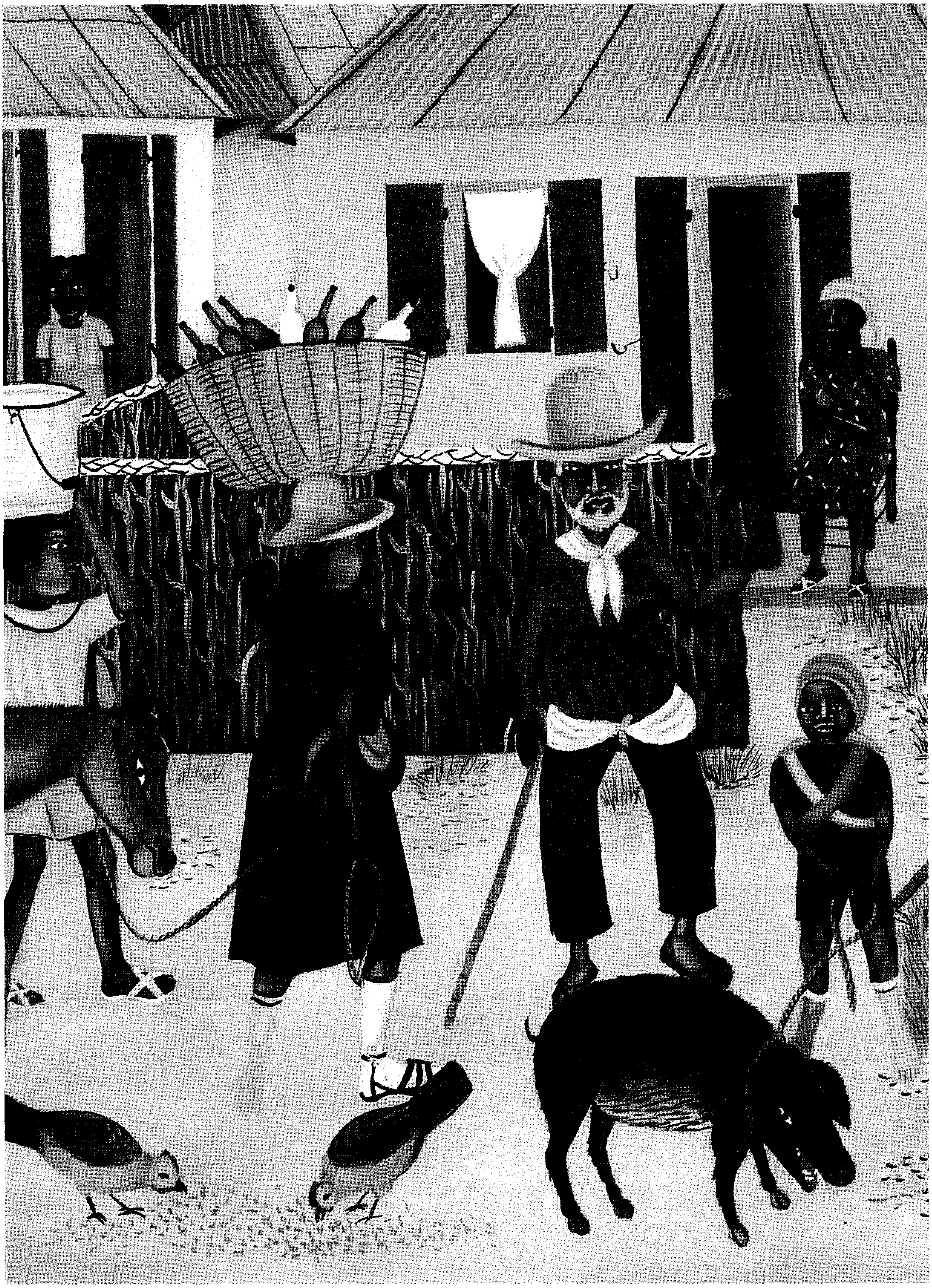
Marcel must have worked in the middle of the night, because he was long gone when we awoke and found no Matador but just a whitish, bloody mass, which Ma Ninotte then cut up with her broad-bladed knife and distributed in newspaper as gifts to the other families in our building, and to the doctor who cured us, to the pharmacist who gave her medicines, to the Syrian shopkeepers who helped her out of jams. The rest was for her, in the form of cured meats, roasts, chops, the pig's head, and sausages, which we had neither the stomach nor the heart to eat.

I have no memory of the pigs who succeeded Matador. Suffering is a harsh vaccine: it must have prepared us not to get too attached to Christmas pigs.

—Patrick Chamoiseau

(*Translated, from the French, by Carol Volk.*)

DETAIL OF JEAN-BAPTISTE JEAN'S "GATHERING TO GO TO A CEREMONY," FROM THE COLLECTION OF JONATHAN DEMME



he'd moved right away from lying and toward understatement.

"I'm sorry."

"It's O.K. How about Ali's dad?"

"Not at this table. Not in this city. Not in this country. He gives me his phone number when he moves."

"Right."

Will had at least managed to introduce some friction into the conversation. Until he'd played the Marcus card, he'd kept slipping off before he'd even started. Now he felt as though he were climbing a mountain rather than a glacier.

"Which country is he in, then?"

"The States. California. I'd prefer Australia, but there you are. At least it's the West Coast."

Will reckoned he'd now heard fifty-seven varieties of this conversation, but this gave him an advantage: He knew how it went, and go it did. He might not have done anything in the last decade and a half, but he could cluck sympathetically when a woman told him how badly her ex-husband had behaved.

"So why the fuck did you have a child with him?" He was drunk. It was New Year's Eve. He was feeling cheeky.

She laughed. "Good question. No answer. You change your mind about people. What's Marcus's mother's name?"

"Fiona." Which, of course, it was.

"Did you change your mind about her?"

"Not really."

"So what happened?"

"I dunno." He shrugged, and somehow managed to give a rather convincing impression of a man who was still baffled, shell-shocked even.

Rachel smiled, and picked up the knife she hadn't used, and examined it. "In the end, 'I dunno' is the only honest answer anyone can give, isn't it? Because I dunno, either, and I'd be kidding myself, and you, if I pretended any different."

At midnight they sought each other out and kissed, a kiss that was somewhere between cheek and lip, the embarrassed ambiguity hopefully significant. And at half past midnight, just before Rachel left, they arranged to get their lads together to compare skateboards and baseball caps and the Christmas edition of "The Simpsons."

"I DON'T get it," said Marcus. He and Will had walked to an amusement arcade to play video games, and the Angel Funhouse, with its epileptic lights and sirens and explosions, turned out to be a suitably nightmarish setting for the difficult conversation Will knew they were going to have. It was, in a way, a grotesque version of popping the question: he had chosen the setting, somewhere that would soften Marcus up and make him more likely to say yes, and all he had to do was spit it out.

"There's nothing to get," said Will blithely. It wasn't true, of course. There was a lot to get, from Marcus's point of view, and Will could quite easily see why he wasn't getting it.

"But why did you tell her you were my dad?"

"I didn't tell her. She just sort of got the wrong end of the stick."

"So why didn't you just say, you know, 'Sorry, you've got the wrong end of the stick'? She probably wouldn't have minded. Why would she care whether you were my dad or not?"

"Don't you ever have conversations where someone took a wrong turn at some point, and then it goes on and on and it becomes too late to put things right? Say someone thought your name was Mark, not Marcus, and every time that person saw you he said, 'Hello, Mark,' and you're saying to yourself, 'Oh, no, I can't tell him now 'cause he'll be really embarrassed that he's been calling me Mark for the last six months.' "

"Six months!"

"Or however long it is."

"I'd just tell him the first time he got it wrong."

"It's not always possible to do that. Anyway," he continued, in a brisk, let's-cut-the-crap tone, "the point is, this woman thinks you're my son."

"So tell her I'm not."

"No."

"Why not?"

"We're going round and round in circles here, Marcus. Why can't you just accept the facts?"

"I'll tell her, if you like. I don't mind."

"That's very kind of you, Marcus, but that wouldn't help."

Will was beginning to come to the conclusion that he was not, as he had always previously thought, a good liar. He was an enthusiastic liar, certainly, but enthusiasm was not the same thing as efficacy, and he was now constantly finding himself in a situation whereby, having lied through his teeth for minutes or days or weeks, he was obliged to articulate the humiliating truth. A good liar would never do that. A good liar

WHY REGRET?

Didn't you like the way the ants help
the peony globes open by eating off the glue?
Weren't you cheered to see the ironworkers
sitting on an I-beam dangling from a cable,
in a row, like starlings, eating lunch, maybe
baloney on white with fluorescent mustard?
Wasn't it a revelation to swim all the way
from the estuary, to the river, the kill,
the stream, the run, the brook, the beck,
the sike gone dry, to the shock of a spring?
Didn't you almost shiver to hear the book lice
ticking their sexual dissonance inside the old
Webster's New International, perhaps having
just eaten out of it izle, xyster, and thalassacon?
What did you imagine lay in store anyway
at the end of a world where the sub-substance is
muck, birdlime, slime, mucus, gleet, ooze?
What could the joke have been that night when even
at the tables out of earshot the people were laughing?
Don't worry about becoming emaciated—think of the wren
and how little flesh is needed to make a song.
Didn't it seem somehow familiar when the nymph
split open and the mayfly struggled free
and flew and perched and then its own back

split open and the imago, the true adult,
slowly somersaulted out backwards and
took flight toward the swarm, mouth parts vestigial,
alimentary canal unfit to digest food,
a day or hour left to find the desired one?
Or when Casanova threw the linguine in squid ink
out the window, telling his startled companion,
"The perfected lover does not eat"?
As a child didn't you find it calming to think
of the pinworms as some kind of tiny batons
giving the cadence to the squeezes and releases
around the downward march of debris?
Didn't you once glimpse what seemed your own
inner blazonry in the monarchs, veering
and gliding, in desire, in the middle air?
Weren't you reassured at the thought that these
hinged beings might navigate their way to Mexico
by the flair of the dead bodies of ancestors
who fell in this same migration a year ago?
Isn't it worth missing whatever joy
you might have dreamed, to wake in the night and find
you and your beloved are holding hands in your sleep?

—Galway Kinnell

would have persuaded Marcus ages ago that there were hundreds of reasons that he should pretend to be Will's son, but Will could think of only one.

"Marcus, listen. I'm really interested in this woman, and the only thing I could think of that might make her interested in me was to let her believe you were my son. So I did. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you straight out."

Marcus stared at the video screen—he'd just been exploded by a cross between Robocop and Godzilla—and took a long pull on his can of Coke.

"I don't get it," he said, and burped ostentatiously.

"Oh, come on, Marcus. We've been here before."

"What do you mean, you're really interested in her? Why is she so interesting?"

"I mean . . ." He groaned with despair. "Leave me with just one scrap of dignity, Marcus. That's all I'm asking. Just a little tiny, tatty piece."

Marcus looked at him as if he had suddenly started speaking in Urdu.

"What's dignity got to do with her being interesting?"

"O.K. Forget dignity. I don't deserve any. I fancy this woman, Marcus. I want to go out with her. I'd like her to be my girlfriend."

Finally, Marcus swivelled his eyes away from the video screen, and Will could see they were shining with fascination and pleasure.

"Really?"

"Yes, really." Really, really. He had thought of almost nothing else since New Year's Eve (not that he had much to think about, apart from the word "Rachel," a vague recollection of lots of long dark hair, and a lot of foolish fantasies involving picnics and babies and tearfully devoted mothers-in-law and huge hotel beds) and it was a relief to be able to bring Rachel out into the light, even though it was only Marcus who was up there to inspect her.

"How do you know?"

"How do I know?"

"Yeah. How do you know you want her to be your girlfriend?"

"I don't know. I just feel it in my guts." That was exactly where he felt it. He wasn't feeling it in his heart, or his head, or even his groin; it was in his guts, which had immediately tensed up and allowed for the ingestion of nothing more caloric than cigarette smoke.

"You just met her once? On New Year's Eve?"

"Yeah."

"And that was enough? You knew you wanted her to be your girlfriend straightaway?"

"What is this? How long should I have known her for, according to you?"

"Well, I wouldn't really describe myself as an expert." Will laughed at Marcus's turn of phrase and the furrowed brow that accompanied it: anyone who could look that professional while talking about the minutiae of dating was clearly a twelve-year-old Dr. Love.

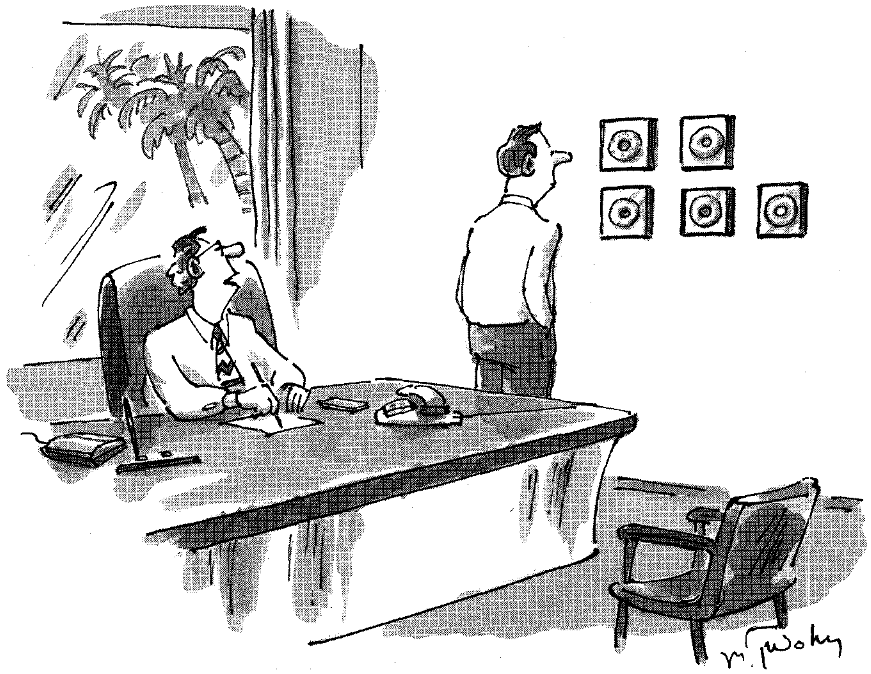
"You're funny, Marcus."

"I know. People keep telling me. I don't care."

Later that night, when Will was home on his own and listening to the sort of music he needed to listen to when he felt like this, music that seemed to find the sore spot in him and press up hard against it, he felt a newfound affection for Marcus.

The conversation in the video arcade had had the virtue of creating a mutuality between them: Will had confessed to something he wanted, and he had asked Marcus to trust him with what he'd confessed, and this seemed more than enough to persuade Marcus that it would be disloyal of him not to act as Will's son for an afternoon. So Will made that call, heart thumping, and wangled a Saturday lunch invitation for the pair of them.

Marcus came round just after midday, in a hairy sweater Fiona had given him for Christmas and a disastrous pair of canary-yellow cords that might have looked cute on a four-year-old. Will was wearing his favorite Paul Smith shirt and a black leather jacket that he liked to think made him look a little like Matt Dillon in "Drugstore



"Jalapeño was our first bagel to go platinum."

• •

Cowboy." What was going on here, Will reckoned, was that Marcus was showing a refreshingly rebellious disregard for his dad's dandyism, so he tried to inculcate a feeling of pride, and to ignore the urge to take him out shopping.

"Listen, I've got some questions," Marcus said in the car on the way to Rachel's place. "How much did I weigh at birth?"

"I dunno. It was your birth."

"Yeah, but you should know, shouldn't you? If you're my dad, I mean."

"Surely at this stage in our relationship we're a bit beyond birthweights, aren't we? If you were twelve weeks old it might come up, but twelve years old . . ."

"O.K., so when's my birthday?"

"Marcus, she doesn't suspect we're not father and son. She's not going to be trying to catch us out."

"But suppose it came up. Suppose I said, you know, 'Dad's promised me a new Nintendo game for my birthday,' and she said to you, 'When's his birthday?' "

"Why is she asking me? Why isn't she asking you?"

"Just suppose."

"O.K., when's your birthday?"

"August the nineteenth."

"I'll remember, I promise. August the nineteenth."

"And what's my favorite food?"

"Tell me," Will said wearily.

"Pasta with the mushroom-and-tomato sauce my mum makes."

"Right."

"And who's my mum?"

"Sorry?"

"Who's my mum?"

The question was so basic and yet so pertinent that for a moment Will was completely thrown.

"Your mum's your mum."

"So you were married to my mum and you've split up."

"Yeah. Whatever."

"And does that bother you? Or me?"

Suddenly the absurdity of the questions got to both of them. Marcus began to giggle, a peculiar high-pitched meow that sounded nothing like him or like any other human but proved to be extraordinarily infectious. Will launched into his own version of a giggling fit.

"It doesn't bother me. Does it bother you?" he said eventually.

But Marcus was unable to reply. He was still meowing.

RACHEL lived just up the road from Camden Lock, in a tall, narrow house full of books and old furniture and sepia photographs of dramatic, romantic Eastern European relatives, and for a moment Will was grateful that his flat and her house would never get a chance to meet.

"Hi, Will and . . . Mark, is that right?"

"Marcus," said Marcus, and nudged Will meaningfully.

"Come in, both of you. Come and meet Ali."

Will had remembered every single tiny detail that Rachel had offered him that first night. He knew the names of the books she had illustrated, and her ex's name, and where he lived, and what he did. . . . It was unimaginable that he could have forgotten Ali's name. But she had forgotten Marcus's name, and it was thus perfectly clear that she hadn't spent the last ten days in a sleepless fever of imagining and remembering and wondering. He felt crushed. He might as well give up now. These feelings were exactly what he'd been afraid of.

Rachel shouted up the stairs, "Ali!" Nothing. "ALI!" Still nothing. She looked at Will and shrugged. "He's got his headphones on. Shall we go up?"

Ali's bedroom door was indistinguishable from all the other bedroom doors—no skull and crossbones, no "Keep Out" signs, no hip-hop graffiti—but inside there was no question that the room belonged to a boy stuck between the equally wretched states of childhood and adolescence in early 1994. Everything was there—the posters of Ryan Giggs and Michael Jordan and Pamela Anderson, the Super Mario stickers. A social historian of the future would probably be able to date the room to within a twenty-four-hour period. Ali himself was slumped in front of his Nintendo, headphones still on, oblivious of his guests. His mother went over and tapped him on the shoulder, and he jumped.

"Oh, hi. Sorry." Ali stood up, and Will immediately saw that this wasn't going to work. Ali was cool—basketball shoes, baggy skate-punk trousers, shaggy grunge hair, even an earring—and his face seemed to darken when he took in Marcus's yellow cords and hairy sweater.

"Marcus Ali, Ali Marcus," said Rachel. Marcus offered his hand, and Ali took it almost satirically. "Ali Will, Will Ali." Will raised his eyebrows in Ali's direction. He thought Ali might appreciate the understatement.

"Do you guys want to hang out up here for a while?" Rachel asked them.

Marcus glanced at Will and Will nodded once, while Rachel's back was turned toward him.

"Yeah." Marcus shrugged, and for a moment Will loved him, really loved him.

"O.K.," said Ali, with even less enthusiasm.

Rachel and Will went downstairs. Ten minutes later—time enough for Will to have dreamed up a whole scenario whereby the four of them took a house in Spain for the summer—they heard a door slam. Rachel went to investigate and came flying back into the sitting room seconds afterward.

"I'm afraid Marcus has gone home," she said.

MARCUS was standing at a bus stop near the Lock when Will found him. His sense of direction wasn't brilliant, and he was actually standing on the wrong side of the road, waiting for a bus that would have taken him to the West End, so it was probably just as well that Will drew up alongside him and told him to get into the car.

"What are you playing at?" Will asked him angrily. "What happened upstairs?"

"He's off his head. He said if you went out with his mum I was fucking dead. And I believed him, too. Anyone would have. He's really scary. Where are we going?" It was raining now, and Camden was choked with traffic and Saturday shoppers.

"Back to Rachel's."

"I don't want to go back there."

"Tough."

"She'll think I'm stupid."

"She won't."

"Why not?"

"Because she thought something like this might happen. She said Ali could be difficult sometimes."

That made Marcus laugh "Ha!"—the kind of laugh you did when there was nothing much to laugh at. "Difficult? He was going to tie me up and lock me in a cupboard and only feed me once a day."

"Is that what he said?"

"Not in so many words."

"Anyway, he's crying his eyes out now."

"Really?"

"Really. Blubbing like a three-year-old."

This cheered Marcus up no end; he was perfectly happy to go back to Rachel's, he decided.

As it turned out, running away from the house was the best thing Marcus could have possibly done. When they got back, everything had changed: it was as if everyone knew why they were there, instead of pretending that the whole lunch thing was a way of getting Ali and Marcus together to play video games.

"Ali has got something to say to you, Marcus," Rachel said, when they walked in.

"Sorry, Marcus," Ali snivelled. "I didn't mean to say those things."

"That's O.K., Ali," he said.

"O.K., shake hands, guys," said Rachel, and they did, although it was a rather peculiar and embarrassing handshake.

"Ali finds this very difficult."

"So does Marcus. Marcus feels just the same, don't you?"

"About what?"

"About . . . you know . . . this sort of thing."

"Yes," Marcus said. "I do. Exactly the same."

"Because you get into a pattern," Will said, "and then each new person who comes along seems to represent some kind of a threat."

"Exactly. And the last guy I—" Rachel broke off. "I'm sorry, I'm not comparing you to him. And I'm not saying that, you know, we're . . . Anyway," Rachel went on, "the last guy I went out with . . . he wasn't one hundred per cent good news, and he certainly couldn't work out how Ali fitted in, and they ended up . . . not on good terms."

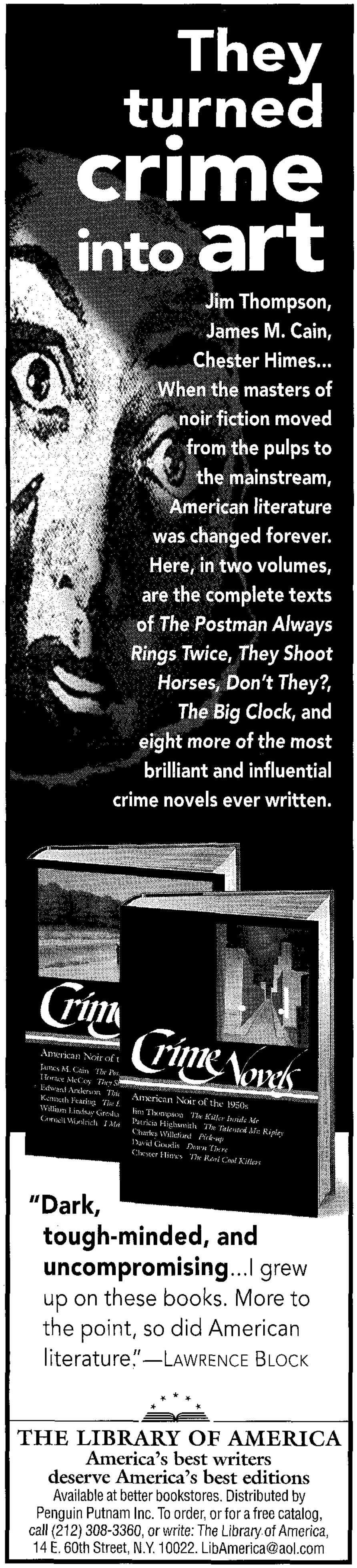
"He was a weirdo," said Ali.

"Look, I'm sorry that everything's become quite so . . . unsubtle," Rachel said. "I have no idea whether . . . I mean, I don't know, I just got the impression that on New Year's Eve . . ." She made a face. "Oh, God, this is so embarrassing. And it's all your fault, Ali. We shouldn't have to talk about this now."

"It's O.K.," said Marcus brightly. "He really fancies you. He told me."

WITH Rachel, Will soon realized that lying about one's identity was a purely short-term strategy, useful only in relationships that had a limited life span. You could tell a bus conductor or a taxi-driver all sorts of rubbish, provided the journey was brief, but if you intended to spend the rest of your life with somebody, then it

"There is a Santa Claus, but his grandchildren get first pick of all the good stuff."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was inevitable that she would find out a few things sooner or later.

He decided that he would gradually correct the erroneous impressions he might have given, but halfway through their first time out together he was reminded of the old April Fools' Day joke about Britain changing over to driving on the right, and making the changeover gradually. Either you lied or you told the truth, and any in-between state was pretty tricky to achieve.

"Oh" was all Rachel said at first, when he told her he wasn't Marcus's natural father. She was trying and failing to pick up a clump of seaweed with her chopsticks.

"It's not really seaweed, you know," said Will in a misguided attempt to make out that what he was telling her wasn't any kind of big deal—not to him, anyway. "It's lettuce or something. They shred it and fry it and put sugar and—"

"So who is his natural father?"

"Well," said Will. Why hadn't it occurred to him that if he wasn't Marcus's father then someone else would have to be? "It's a guy called Clive who lives in Cambridge."

"So—sorry, I'm being a bit thick here—if you're not Marcus's natural father, and you don't live with him, then, you know, how is he your son?"

"Yes. Ha-ha. I see what you mean. It must look very confusing from the outside."

"Tell me how it is on the inside."

"It's just that sort of relationship. I'm old enough to be his father. He's young enough to be my son. So—I don't know. Would you like to move on to wine now, or do you want to stick to Japanese beer? So, is your relationship with Ali as complicated as mine and Marcus's?"

"No. I slept with his father and nine months later I gave birth, and that's about it. Pretty straightforward, but these things usually are."

"Yes. I envy you."

"I'm sorry to harp on about this, but I still haven't got it all worked out. You're Marcus's stepfather, but you don't live with him or his mother."

"I suppose you could look at it that way, yes."

"How else could you look at it?"

"Ha. I see what you mean," he said thoughtfully, as if he had just that second realized that there was only one way of looking at it.

"Did you ever live with Marcus's mother?"

"Define 'live with.' "

"Did you ever have a spare pair of socks at her house? Or a toothbrush?"

"No."

"Just... no?"

"Yes."

He picked up the last little spring roll, dunked it in the chili sauce, put it in his mouth, and behaved as though it were way too big, so he wouldn't be able to speak for several minutes. But Rachel simply sat there and waited for him to finish his mouthful, and however much he chewed and grimaced he couldn't make a mini spring roll last forever. So he told her the truth, as he knew he would, and she was appalled, as she had every right to be.

"I never actually said he was my son. The words 'I have a son called Marcus' never passed my lips. That's what you chose to believe."

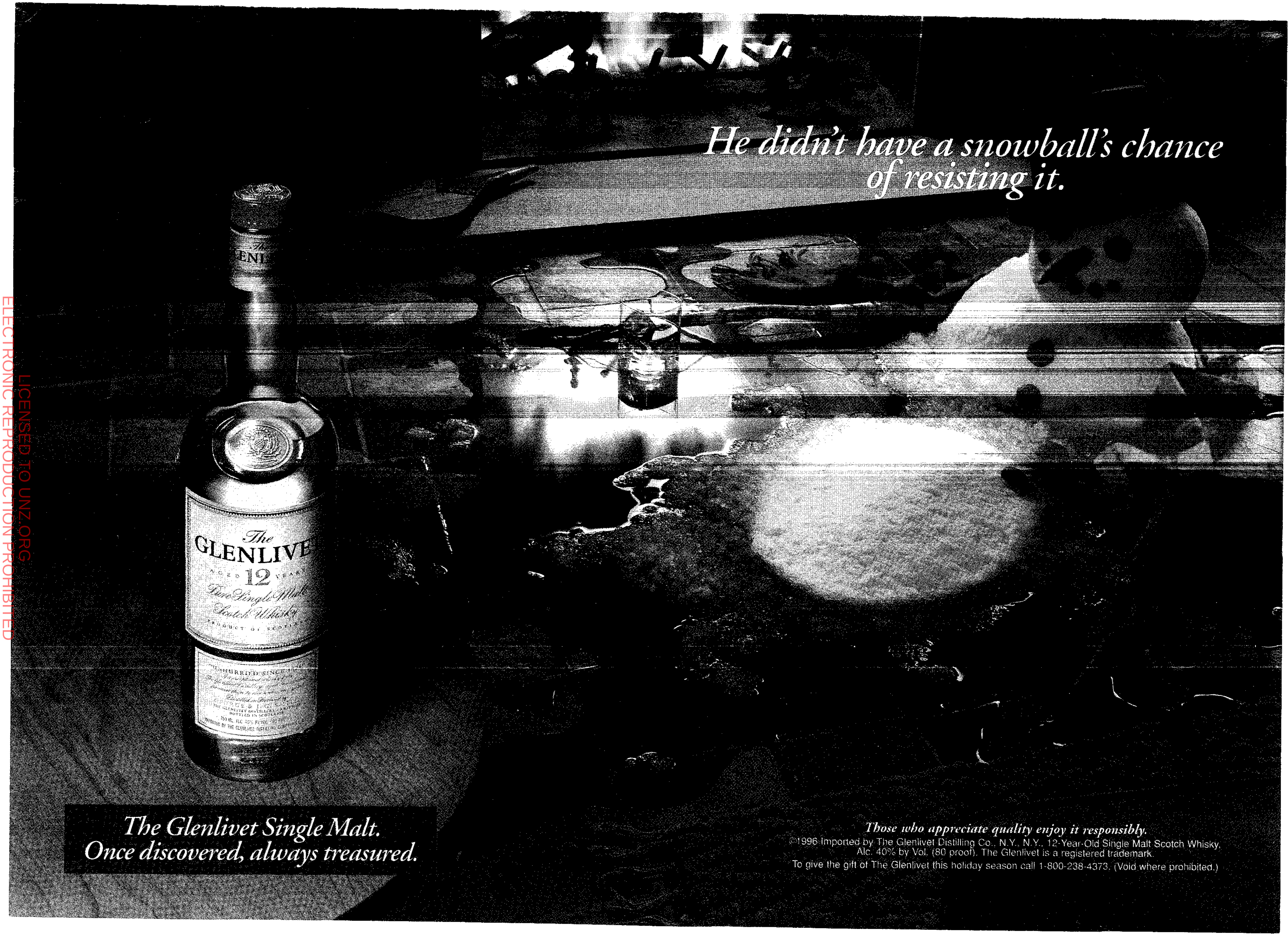
"Yeah, right. It's me who's the fantasist. I thought, Cute guy, if only he had a kid, a geeky son, pre-teen-age if possible, and then you turned up at my house with Marcus, and bingo! I made this crazy link because of some deep psychological need in me."

It wasn't turning out as badly as Will feared it might. She was seeing some kind of funny side, even though she clearly thought he was a weirdo.

"But where does Marcus come in? I mean, you obviously hadn't hired him for the afternoon. There's some kind of relationship there."

She was right, of course, and he rescued a potentially disastrous evening by telling her everything there was to tell. Nearly everything, anyway: he didn't tell her the reason he had thought to lie about Marcus in the first place was that he had joined SPAT. He didn't want her to think he had a problem.

Rachel invited him back for coffee after the meal, but Will knew sex wasn't in the air. All that seemed to be coming from her was a quiet amusement and a sort of baffled tolerance, and though he was grateful for these small mercies, they were very rarely, he would imagine, precursors to any kind of physi-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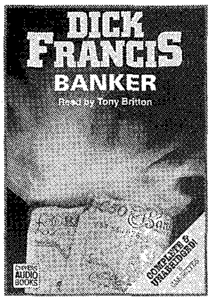

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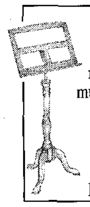

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NEW RULE

A New Year's white morning of hard new ice.
High on the frozen branches I saw a squirrel jump and skid.
Is this scary? he seemed to say and glanced

down at me, clutching his branch as it bobbed
in stiff recoil—or is it just that everything sounds wrong today?
The branches

clinked.
He wiped his small cold lips with one hand.
Do you fear the same things as

I fear? I countered, looking up.
His empire of branches slid against the air.
The night of hooks?

The man blade left open on the stair?
Not enough spin on it, said my true love
when he left in our fifth year.

The squirrel bounced down a branch
and caught a peg of tears.
The way to hold on is

afterwards
so
clear.

—ANNE CARSON

cal intimacy beyond a quick hair ruffle.

Rachel made coffee in great big blue designer cups and they sat opposite each other, Rachel spread out on the sofa, Will bolt upright in an old armchair covered with some kind of Asian throw.

"Why did you think Marcus would make you more interesting?" she asked him after they had poured and stirred and blown and done everything else they could think of doing to a cup of coffee.

"Was I more interesting?"

"Yes, I suppose you were."

"Why?"

"Because . . . I thought you were a sort of blank—you weren't passionate about anything, you didn't seem to have much to say—and then when you said you had a kid—"

"I didn't actually say—"

"Yeah, whatever . . . I thought, I've got this guy all wrong."

"So there you are then. You've answered your own question."

"But I had got you wrong."

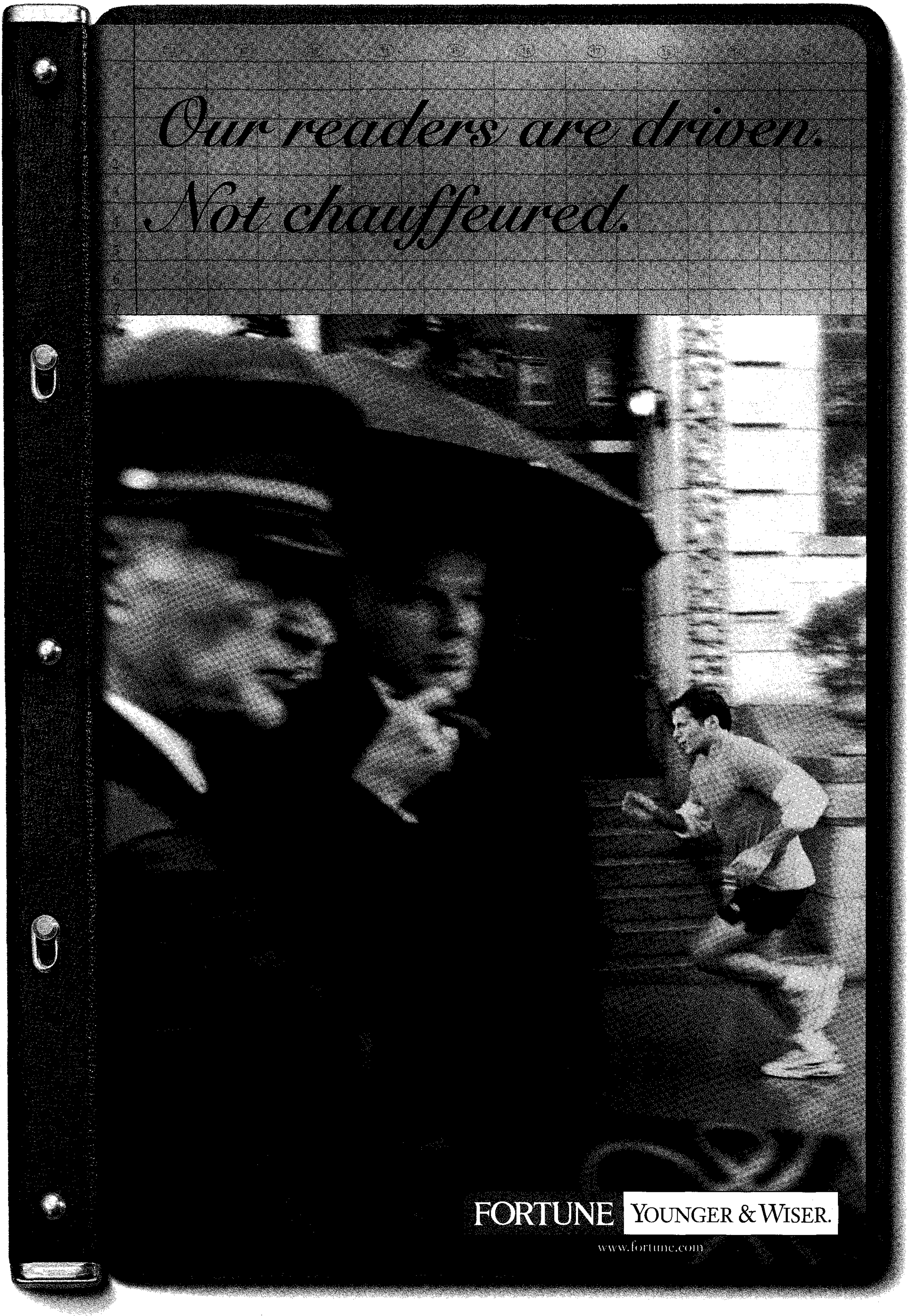
"How'd you work that out?"

"Because there is something there. You didn't make it all up about Marcus. You're involved, and you care, and you understand him. So you're not the kind of guy I thought you were before you mentioned him. That's the point."

"It's hard to think of Marcus as the point of anything. I know that's a terrible thing to say, but it's true. You've met him."

"He's just a bit messed up. But he adores you."

It had never occurred to Will that Marcus actually had any real feelings toward him, especially feelings that were visible to a third party. He knew that Marcus liked hanging out at his place, but he had taken that merely as evidence of the boy's eccentricity and loneliness. Rachel's observation that there were real feelings involved changed things, just as they sometimes did when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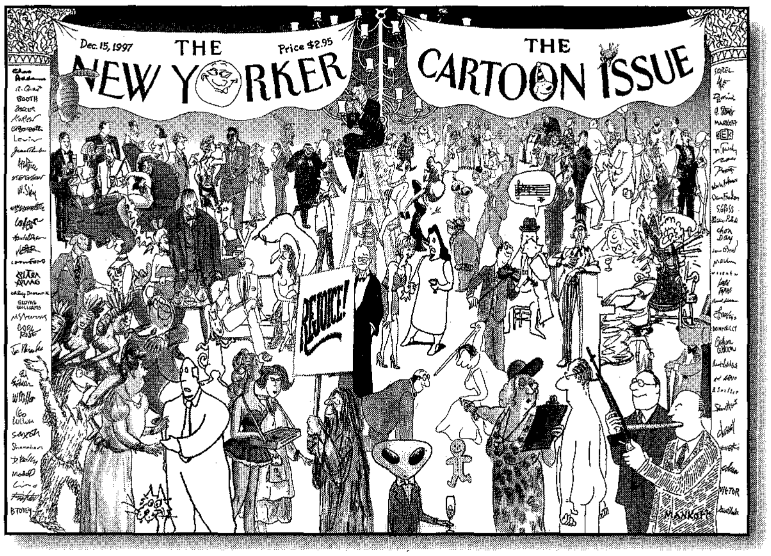

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you found out that a woman you'd barely noticed was attracted to you, so that you ended up finding her much more interesting than you ever had done before.

"You reckon?"

"Of course he does."

"He's still not the point, though. If I were about to stick my head in the gas oven, and then you told me Marcus adored me, I wouldn't necessarily take it out again."

Rachel laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't know. Just the idea that I'd be there in that situation. If you were sticking your head in a gas oven at the end of an evening, we'd have to come to the conclusion that the evening hadn't been a raging success."

"I . . . " Will stopped, and started, and then plowed on anyway, with as much sincerity as he could muster, and with much more sincerity than the line could bear. "I would never stick my head in a gas oven at the end of an evening with you."

He knew the moment he'd said it that it was a big mistake. He'd meant it, but that was precisely what provoked the hilarity. Rachel laughed and laughed until her eyes filled with tears. "That," she said in between great gulps of air, "is . . . the . . . most . . . romantic . . . thing . . . anyone's ever said to me."

Will sat there helplessly, feeling like the stupidest man in the world, but when things calmed down again they seemed to be in a different place.

"You don't need a point," Rachel told him.

"Don't I? That's not what it feels like."

"No, no. The point is you keep going. I don't know if you even realize it, but on the quiet you don't think life's too bad."

Was that really all there was to it? Probably not, Will thought. There were probably all sorts of things missing—stuff about depression, and how it made you tired of everything, and about loneliness, and panic, and plain bewilderment. But Rachel's simple positivity was something to be going on with, and, in any case, the conversation about the point created a point of its own, because there was a pause, and Rachel looked at him, and that was when they started kissing. ♦

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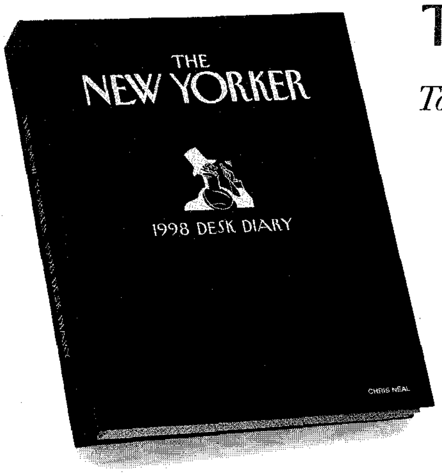
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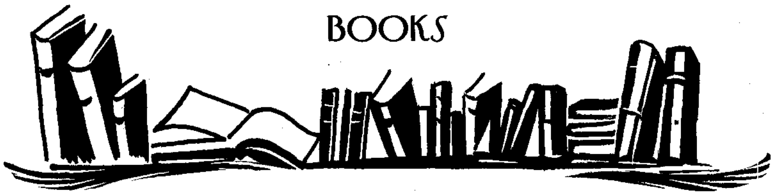

MARCHING LIFE

The vast, modest labor of V. S. Pritchett was probably his best story of all.

BY ROGER ANGELL

ALWAYS alert to oddity and happenstance, V. S. Pritchett, who died last March, at the age of ninety-six, often mentioned the linked, double ticking of his own life and the clock of the century, but he must have sensed also that this shared distance of time had become a distraction, almost a disservice, to him near the end. The same proviso applies to the massive accumulation of his writings—fifteen collections of stories, nine works of criticism, three biographies, five novels, seven travel books, and two classic works of autobiography—which led to the near-universal bestowal of the title First Man of Letters upon him, once he had reached his mid-seventies. The honorific never quite fitted. Pritchett was aged at the end, to be sure, but not ancient. He was non-monumental. He was not literary—not in many senses of the word, at least. He was not a stylist, for instance, and he liked to point out that he had been a hack long before he became a critic. Even his knightly robes kept slipping askew. The moment that he and his wife, Dorothy, got back to their house from Buckingham Palace, in 1975, where the Queen had dubbed him Sir Victor, they called up their friends to tell them what tune the Guards regimental band had played as he approached the kneeling bench: Frank Sinatra's "My Way." They were shouting with laughter.

Pritchett will be remembered by everyone who knew him for his curiosity—a tourist's eagerness that had left its stamp upon his expressive face and was never far removed from his writing. His eyes, always alert, and his mouth, which often showed a skewed half smile, seemed ready on the instant to flower into delight but could change just as quickly to a thoughtful, deeply inward look of consideration, with his domed head and large jaw somehow forming an apparatus for either procedure. A short, strong-looking man, with thick shoulders and an uptilted gaze, he appeared at times to be standing behind an invisible pub counter, or perhaps about to oversee the unloading of a shipment of crocuses or greyhounds. There was a strain of workaday London practicality about him, and the surprise was that this avidity should be directed toward books and stories and ideas, instead of the tradesman's ledger. His cheerfulness—friends and relatives and other writers (writers in particular) could be seen standing near him whenever the chance came along, as if they were warming themselves at an old-fashioned coke-burning fireplace—no doubt derived from a resiliency developed during an unpeaceful childhood, but later on it bore an unmistakable air of relief: the look of a writer who has found a way to keep at it, to write all the time, and thus not to miss any part of himself in the end. He had freed himself of the occupational self-pity that makes so many writers so much less fun to meet than one expects.

I was an editor of his for almost fifty years, starting at *Holiday*, for which he wrote vigorous, impeccable travel essays, and continuing, over a longer period, with his stories for this magazine, and we wrote each other ceaselessly back and forth, and talked about everything—well, maybe not his neckties. In time, I came to understand that the amiable attention he gave to even the smallest suggested cut or rephrasing in his text was not a sign of politeness or modesty but came from the intense, almost sensual pleasure he took in every part of the writing business. He is the only writer I have known who would thank you for a rejection; he would be disappointed when it happened, to be sure, but eager to learn what had seemed to go wrong, and then you could hear in his murmuring, diminishing tones over the telephone the processes of revision already at work in his mind. "The Fig Tree," one of his most celebrated and satisfying longer stories (it runs well over ten thousand words), was sent back twice in its early form. In the first revision, Pritchett had followed some suggestion of mine about a different direction for the ending—a notion that clearly made matters worse. He thanked me once again and went back to work. The third version, which came in almost a year after the first, was a major restructuring, front to back, and required nothing from this end except gratitude: he had got it right, and there was almost more pleasure in that than there would have been in a perfect first manuscript—of which he was also capable, of course. Writing is hard work, and Pritchett was a practitioner who didn't resent its ditchdigging days. "I am really just a daily journalist," he said once. "I sit down every day to do it, because I have to do it, and now I know how to do it. [I] actually do enjoy the act of writing, and it is that which means the most to me."

Pritchett's fame, whatever its eventual dimensions, will probably rest upon his two-volume autobiography, "A Cab at the Door" and "Midnight Oil" (published in 1968 and 1971, respectively), and upon the "Complete Collected Stories" (1990), a handsome, corner-of-the-bookcase volume of eighty-two stories, which, taken together, present a mixture of weight and shimmering human complication, and a unifying Chekhovian continuity. Readers may also avail themselves of "The Pritchett Century," a new anthology (Modern Library; $23), selected by his son Oliver, who is a *Sunday Telegraph* columnist, which combines excerpts from the autobiography; thirteen stories; parts of the novels "Dead Man Leading" and "Mr. Beluncle"; selections from Pritchett's biographies of Turgenev and Chekhov; eight samples of travel writing; twenty-one critical essays; and a posthumous appreciation, by John Bayley, which was first published in the *London Review of Books*. Any presumed anticlimax here is inappropriate, for the absorbing, well-written, and joyful obituaries that followed Sir Victor's death would make a

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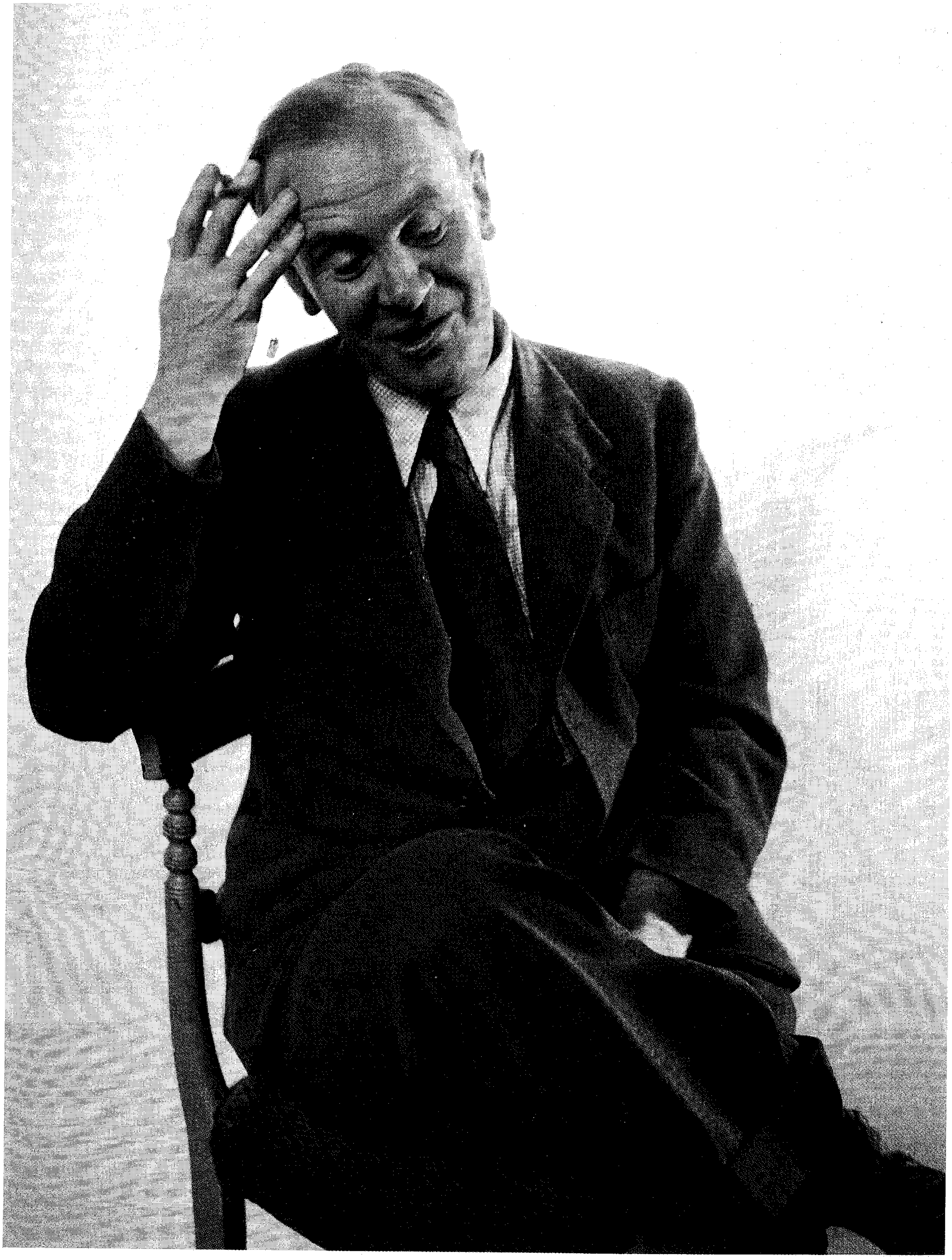
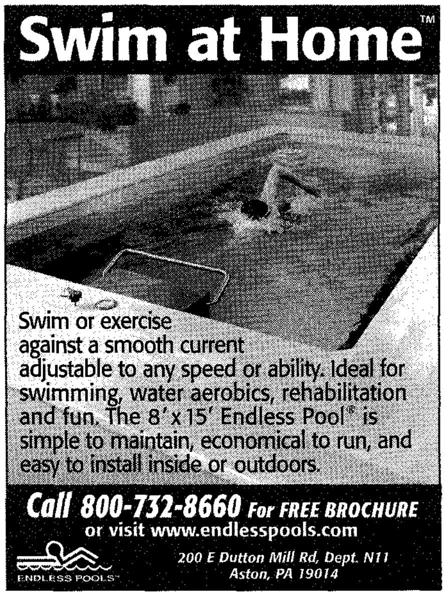


Cecil Beaton's Pritchett, at forty-eight, catches socks and ideas in full flow.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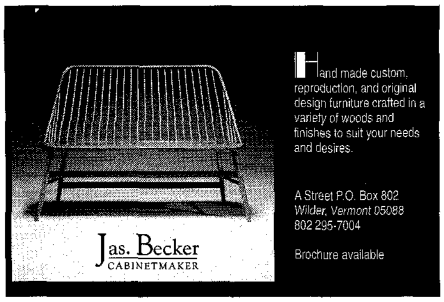
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VILLE ET VILLAGE

lively little anthology all on their own.

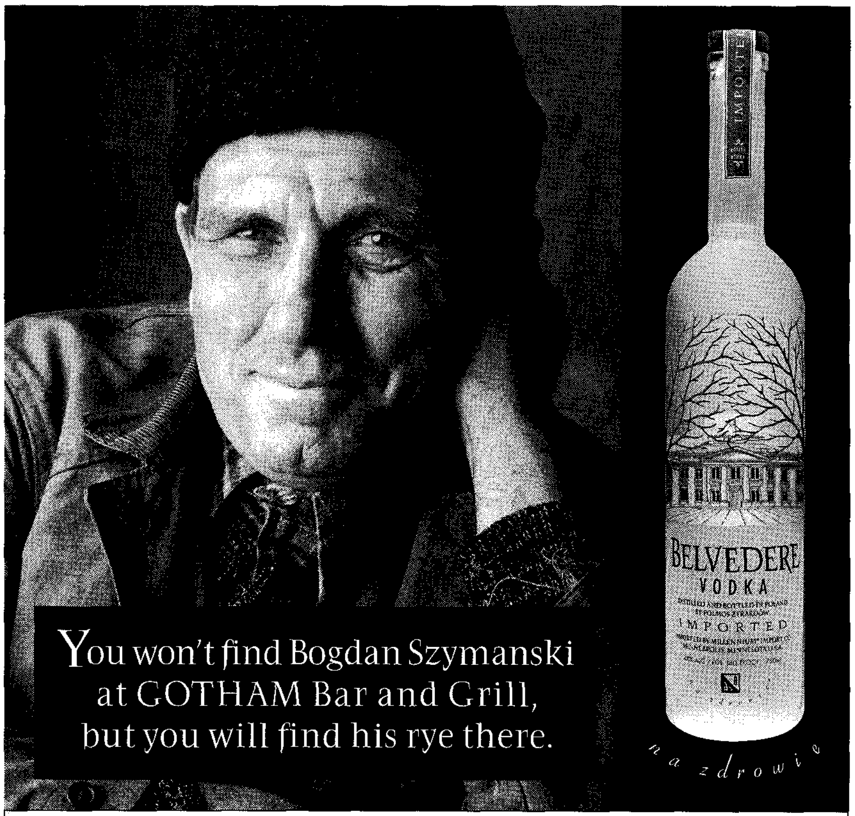
I think the obit writers took their tone from "A Cab at the Door," Pritchett's detailed account of his semi-impoverished, bounced-about Edwardian childhood, and the means for survival he devised while he was in the toils of a dramatizing, self-destructive floorwalker-and-salesman father, whose repeated scruffy business failures and the family's furtive decampings explain the book's title; a derisive, emotional mother ("her greenish grey and fretful eyes quick and full of lies," as he puts it); and a family regimen built upon worry and eccentricity. I remember Pritchett, at dinner one night, telling us that no one had ever been invited to a meal at his house when he was a boy; and that if someone rang the doorbell unexpectedly at mealtime his mother would keep the visitor waiting outside until every crumb and vestige of the meal had been hurriedly swept off the table. "There was something shameful or sexual about being caught eating," he said. "I never understood it."

Young Victor made his escape not by the common route of scholastic achievement but through a precocious self-immersion in reading. The "Children's Encyclopedia," a collected "International Library of Famous Literature," and the complete Shakespeare, Dickens, Ruskin, Marcus Aurelius, Hardy, Cervantes, Thackeray, Wells, Coleridge, Marie Corelli—all flowed into him, on the quiet, when he was at an early age, and fixed him for life. "That I understood very little of what I read did not matter to me. I was caught by the passion for print as an alcoholic is caught by the bottle," he wrote. "In prose, I found the common experience and the solid worlds where judgements were made and in which one could firmly tread."

Apprenticed to a Bermondsey leathermonger at fifteen (there wasn't enough money to keep him in school), he read and took writer's notes on the sly, and at twenty, having finessed upper school and university altogether, found himself on his own in Paris. Within five years, he had become an itinerant journalist—on the Continent, in Ireland, in Appalachia—and a full-time student at the U. of V.S.P. While still in his twenties, he became a contributor to the *New Statesman* (he served as its literary editor later on), and began writing novels, short stories, and foreign pieces at the same time. His first travel book, "Marching Spain," recounts his solo journey, at twenty-six, across that country by foot (and without Spanish). There is a sturdy, incautious energy to a life conducted on these terms—a state of mind from an earlier time, but with more Fielding than Dickens in its nature—and his enormous lifelong reading, as well as his critical writings, seems to have come from the same place. "My purpose has always been the same: to *explore* the writers and their intentions," he wrote in "Lasting Impressions." He went on with this procedure in "Midnight Oil": "I have always thought of myself—and therefore of my subjects—as being 'in life,' indeed books have always seemed to be a form of life, and not a distraction from it." Instead of being awed or made uneasy by the great authors of the past, or giving way to anxiety about his better-placed, more assured contemporaries, he remained curious and generous, and gave his considering, sightseer's mind full rein. I like to think of him as someone who went through his century on foot, gaining by attentiveness whatever he had lost by passing up its speed and lightning arrivals, and I recall suddenly seeing this view of him come to life in a passage from one of his later stories, "On the Edge of the Cliff": "From low cliff to high cliff, over the cropped turf, which was like a carpet where the millions of sea pinks and daisies were scattered, mile after mile in their colonies, the old man led the way, digging his knees into the air, gesticulating, talking, pointing to a kestrel above or a cormorant black as soot on a rock." And: "The old man was a strong walker, bending to it, but when he stopped he straightened, and Rowena smiled at his air of detachment as he gazed at distant things as if he knew them."

As a critic, Pritchett was a descendant, or perhaps a cousin once removed, of non-academic practitioners like Gissing, Wells, and Priestley, who brought an unflagging, sparrowlike attention and precision to the experience of letters. He wrote about classical authors and young arrivals with an equal degree of respect, and took up French and German and Spanish not only to read writers in their own languages but as preparation for travel. Russian and Russia itself eluded him, but he was not disconsolate about that. "I have an imaginary Russia in my mind that I owe entirely to Russian writers," he once said. "How splendid and kind and generous writers are in their intellect, in spilling over in this way and in carrying us into their minds and into their experience." Something of his usefulness and his range is conveyed when one runs an eye down the seventy-seven reviews he contributed to this magazine from the fifties to the late eighties, and finds pieces about Arnold Bennett, E. M. Forster, Edmund Wilson, Picasso, George Sand, Swift, Flann O'Brien, Borges, Rushdie, Lewis Carroll, Betjeman, Turgenev, Rebecca West. A secret about Pritchett, I think—and perhaps not enough of this has been made in the recapitulations—is that his own bottomless reading ("I am appalled by the amount I have read," he cries in "Midnight Oil") did not dull the eagerness of his mind. Never lofty, he was able in his critical work to convey his excited participation in this three-part agreement—writing to reading to writing again—and, in turn, to link on the next reader, the one now taking in his review, as an indissoluble part of the process. And he could *write.* Again and again, he is capable of the acute perception, the absolutely convincing illumination of thought, that can transform the eye's journey down a page into a sensual and startling experience. In a piece about Mark Twain he says, "The peculiar power of American nostalgia is that it is not only harking back to something lost in the past, but suggests also the tragedy of a lost future." Writing about John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom novels, he takes note of the attention Updike pays to television commercials, the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, vinyl car seating, and the like, and ventures, "It has always seemed to me that in his preoccupation with the stillness of domestic objects Updike is a descendant, in writing, of the Dutch genre painters, to whom everything in a house, in nature, or in human posture had the gleam of usage on it without which a deeply domestic culture could not survive its own boredom."

It is riveting to read him on Wilson,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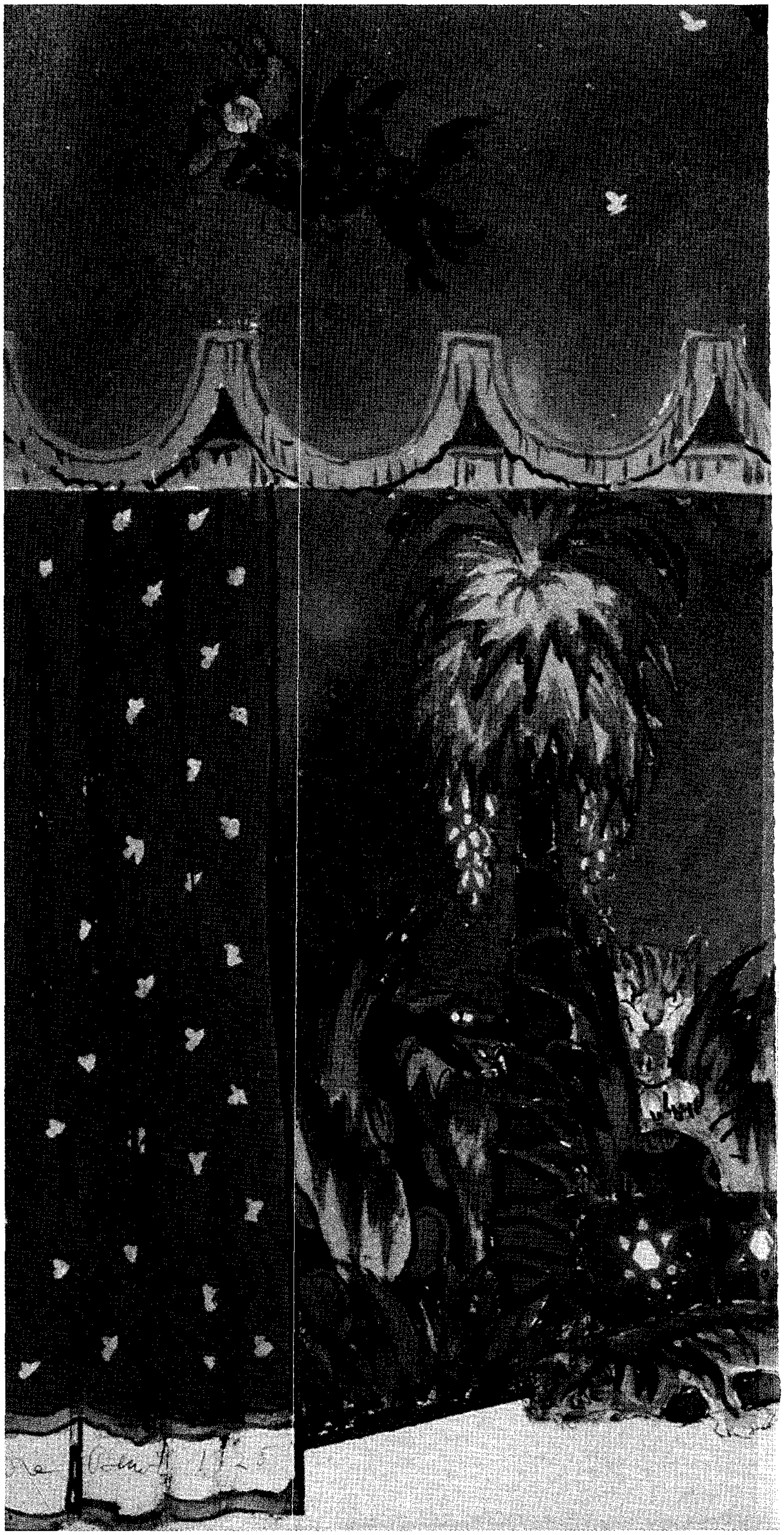
another non-academic who had a long, work-stuffed life as a writer, and was another venerated contributor to this magazine. They could not have been more different. Wilson, a mandarin in every sense, was an intellectual aristocrat and snob, an indefatigable partygoer, and a daring solo voyager into scholarship. Pritchett never produced anything on the order of Wilson's obsessive studies of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Iroquois, Pushkin, or revolutionary history, nor did he possess the gossipy, alcoholic sociability that went into Wilson's five decades of diaries. But Wilson, who was impatient with strangers and scornful of the sort of people who went to the movies, could never have written a Pritchett story.

Here, in any case, is Pritchett looking back to "To the Finland Station," a work that he believed was perhaps the only book on the grand scale to come out of the thirties: "[Wilson] was an enormous reader, one of those readers who are perpetually on the scent from book to book. . . . He is a critic in whom history is broken up into minds. And despite the awkwardness of his prose, he is a coherent artist in the architecture of his subject. I mean that he is an artist—this is evident in so much of his writing—in the sense that he is a man possessed. The effect is all the stronger because he is not exalted; he is, indeed, phlegmatic, as if his whole idea were a matter of grasp. . . . An egotist himself, he understands that the egotism of his conspirators is a passion and a fate."

What in the world would Edmund Wilson have made of this? He is called an awkward, phlegmatic, egotistic writer but at the same moment becomes the recipient of a rush of world-class compliments that say things about him which even he himself has perhaps not perceived. He can't complain, because he has been taken seriously and originally; the contract has been observed, and he will never be quite the same again.

PRITCHETT believed that he had portrayed himself best in his critical works, but for me the stories convey a richer sense of the man, and perhaps more of his unconscious self. They are crowded with sexual passion and an almost pagan happiness in the unexpected turns of life. His characters tend toward the eccentric; they are all



ART OF THE DANCE *The list of Serge Diaghilev's artistic collaborators at the Ballets Russes rea*
the Wadsworth Atheneum, in Hartford (and catalogued in "The Art of Ballets Russes," from Yal

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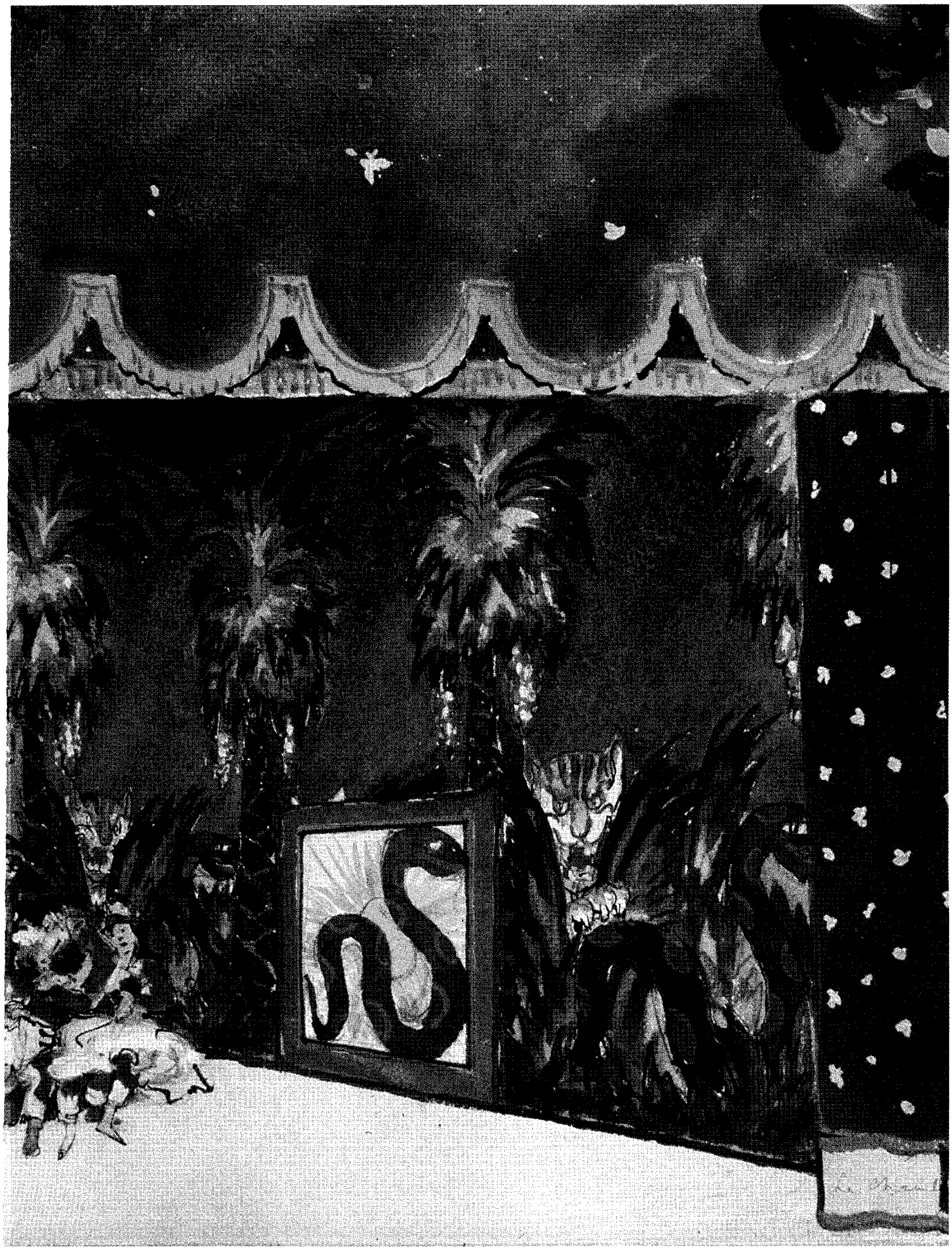
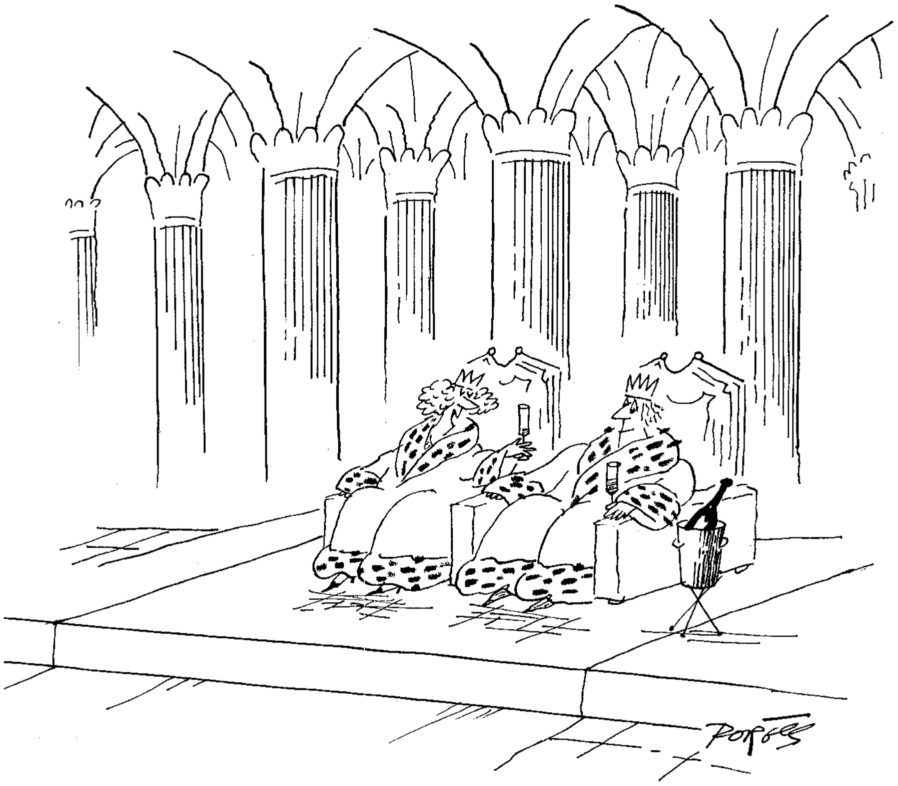


ke a Who's Who of début-de-siècle modernism (Braque, Picasso, Matisse, and Miró, for starters). An exhibition of the company's lavish effects, at cludes costumes, backdrop mockups, production photographs, and such extravagant set designs as this sketch, by Alexandre Benois, from "Petrushka."

elbows and attitude, and puffed with hysterical self-regard. They share an off-center British strain that connects with the Ealing comedies, those weird interviewees on "Monty Python," and the wrangling families in a Mike Leigh movie. Pritchett had a fondness for British middle-to-lower-middle-class professionals and survivors—hairdressers, landladies, landscape gardeners, rag-trade merchants, butchers' widows, decorators, club stewards—and their gabble and confidence contribute to the thick impasto of talk and distracting side events which makes his fiction surprising and familiar at the same time. He drew on everything he knew for the stories, down to the smallest prop or gesture. "Just a Little More" gets its title from the murmur of its gluttonous old gentleman as he helps himself to another serving of beef—the same greedy catchphrase that Pritchett's plump, self-indulgent father says at table in "A Cab at the Door." A temperamental fig tree that used to stand in the back garden of the V. S. Pritchetts' house in Regent's Park Terrace—I can recall Victor complaining about having to sweep up its huge yellow leaves each November—also droops and drops its leaves in "The Fig Tree"; and a Victorian glass case full of stuffed birds which I remember in their first-floor sitting room turns up in the Noisy Brackett trilogy. "Cocky Olly," a story about a fourteen-year-old girl falling in love with a bohemian, art-suffused family next door, takes its name from an invented, dash-about indoor game that the children of the house play—the same game, as Oliver Pritchett has pointed out in his foreword to "The Pritchett Century," that he and his sister, Josephine, sometimes played as young children. Nothing odd or distinctive has been forgotten; the same opulent memory that illuminated "A Cab at the Door" works to dress the sets and write the dialogue in this unreeling vivid show of fiction.

Pritchett was eighty-eight when he wrote "Cocky Olly," which shares with his other late stories a strain of penetrating affection while omitting the imperious, world-well-lost exclusivity that the young require when they are in love. In "On the Edge of the Cliff," a pair of elderly former lovers have met again by accident but quickly agree not to see each other anymore: each is clinging to a much younger lover, and though they know that these arrangements can't last they don't want to hurry the process by throwing the young peo-



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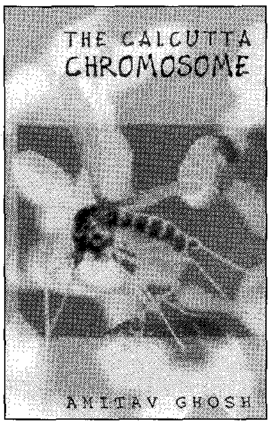
ple together. The former lovers part without regret, almost blithely, each recognizing the stratagems and kinds of acceptance that are necessary to keep hold of such luck. Pritchett's lovers aren't particularly lovable: the middle-aged, long since abandoned wife and the shouting, preposterous widower who are park neighbors in "Did You Invite Me?" have every conceivable reason not to get together, including their two dogs, who fight. We don't like the pair enough to want a happy ending, but they know what they have seen in each other, and must have. Almost apologetically, Pritchett tips us off at the end: their houses are up for sale, one of the dogs has a new owner, and the other has disappeared somewhere.

Summing up fiction is a losing game, of course, and if I persist here it is only to suggest the exuberant disorder that blows through the Pritchett stories. "Cocky Olly" puts two children on the wrong train—a huge mess, involving misunderstandings, lies, the police, and a headline murder case. We can barely follow it, but the children don't care. They love every minute because this is what life is like to them at its best; they are at home in muddle. In one of his last stories, "A Change of Policy," a brainy, grownup couple—he an art publisher, she the recent editor of an intellectual journal—are almost too busy to fall in love. He has a wife who has been in a deep coma after an accident, and a young son; the woman, Paula, is uneasy—it's all too much for her. In delayed, glancing, elegantly circumstantial fashion, they do become lovers. Then he is killed in a horse-riding accident, which we hear about, disbelieving, through a garbled overseas telephone call. There is a shift, a little pause of years, and then a quiet ending that contains a turnabout. It's almost an O. Henryesque surprise. "Come *on*," we want to say, but something holds us back. Fiction need not always confirm our knowing, irony-abraded wariness; sometimes we need it to motor along life's outer possibilities, to provide the jolts and swerves that keep us awake, against all odds, and up for the next part of the trip.

THE almost visible sweetness that surrounded Victor Pritchett in his later years flowed from a happy sixty-one-year marriage, and the glances and flashes of attention that he and Dorothy

(Advt.)

We are a species susceptible to all manner of fevers and fervors; certainly not the least of which is our passion to create wonderful things—and to experience the wonderful things created by others.



Amitav Ghosh imagines a massive worldwide conspiracy with roots in the research laboratory of Ronald Ross, the British scientist who discovered by a suspiciously convenient accident how malaria is transmitted to humans. ***THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME*** is at once a provocative literary adventure, a medical thriller, an allegorical fable, an historical novel, a ghost story; it is, in fact, a book that is nearly impossible to categorize. At once cerebral and suspenseful, it is many different things all wrapped around an intriguing philosophical core. What it isn't is ordinary.

PARADISE FEVER is the title of **Ptolemy Tompkins**'s most unusual memoirs. The son of bestselling author and '70s New Age guru Peter Tompkins, Ptolemy spent his boyhood surrounded by a surreal assortment of orgiasts, space ship communicants, nude beekeepers and visionaries of every stripe who inhabited his charismatic father's universe. While outrageous, exciting, and often very funny, this boy's life was less than idyllic. There was trouble in the Tompkins' "paradise." And those of us initially inclined to envy Ptolemy's childhood freedoms might reconsider after reading his story.

PARADISE FEVER
PKINS
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MICHAEL SWANWICK

The need to know can be a fever also, one that has devastating consequences in **Michael Swanwick**'s ***JACK FAUST.*** In this new spin on the classic tale of a medieval scholar who sells his soul for unlimited knowledge, a very different sort of devil provides Dr. Faustus with information that was unimaginable back in Goethe's day. Privy to the secrets of microbiology, aerodynamics, the cosmos, and the atom, Swanwick's protagonist sets out to industrialize Europe centuries before its rightful time. And the results demonstrate conclusively that, if a little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing, a lot of it can be catastrophic.

We'll talk again.

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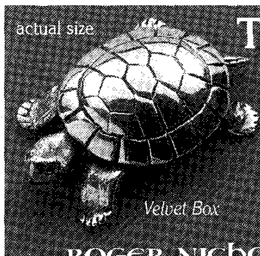
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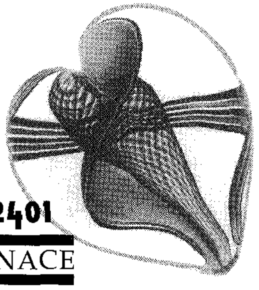

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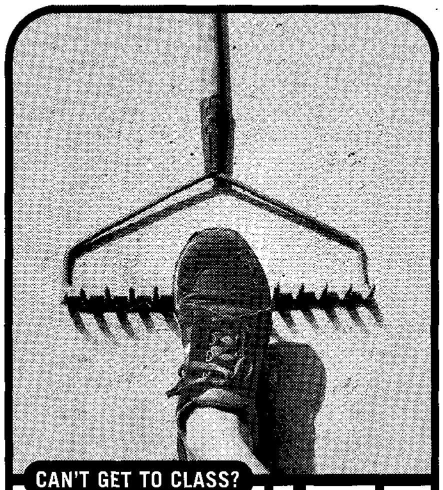
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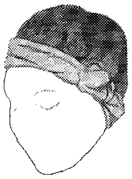

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directed toward each other in the company of friends were a caution. She was his amanuensis and translator—he wrote in a squiggly, mystifying private Cyrilic—and his most trusted editor. I remember the look of blissful pride that overtook him one night when some extroverted Welsh topers in a London pub we were in spotted a Cymry strain in Dorothy's calm, intelligent face and coaxed her into the inevitable singalong.

I can't quite place the London restaurant where my wife, Carol, and I had our last lunch with the Pritchetts, but I remember a little swatch of afternoon sunshine lying across our table as we finished our coffee, and the happy, unstopping flow of talk: about absent friends (my splendid colleague Edith Oliver); about Wimbledon (Dorothy was mad for Navratilova); books (Trollope, I think); and times gone by (the broiling-hot July in the mid-sixties when, by coincidence, they had ended up subletting the walkup apartment directly over ours, on East Ninety-fourth Street, and how the odd, bumping footsteps we kept hearing overhead were finally explained when they told us that they stayed cool up there by going naked all day). Perhaps this was also the lunch when Victor told us about calling upon Yeats, years and years before, in Dublin, and about the great man's coming out onto Merrion Square wearing only one sock; he drew its mate out of his pocket and, leaning on his young visitor, pulled it on. So we ended another meal with laughter, and did not linger long, much as we wished to. Pritchett never showed the dazed, half-there look of the mid-book author—he was too considerate for that—but it was understood by everyone who cared about him that his main engagement always awaited him. After our goodbyes and their cab ride home that day, there might be a nap for him, but soon he would climb the four flights of stairs to his top-floor study, fire up his pipe, and pick up his book or writing board. He was back on the road. ♦

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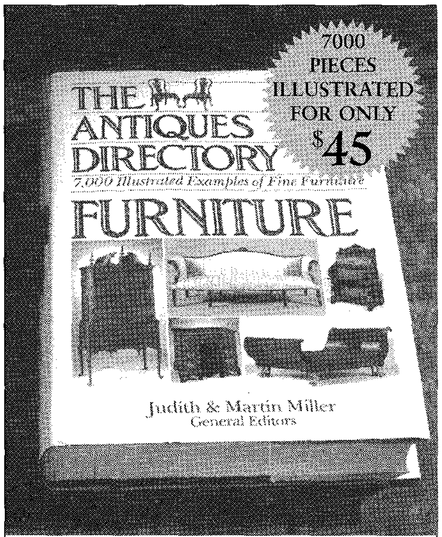
It was much larger than that: It was a battle to wrestle control of our classrooms away from the stranglehold of our current discipline system that allows students to fall into the ravine of failure by the thousands and knock over their peers along the way, like an endless, winding game of dominoes.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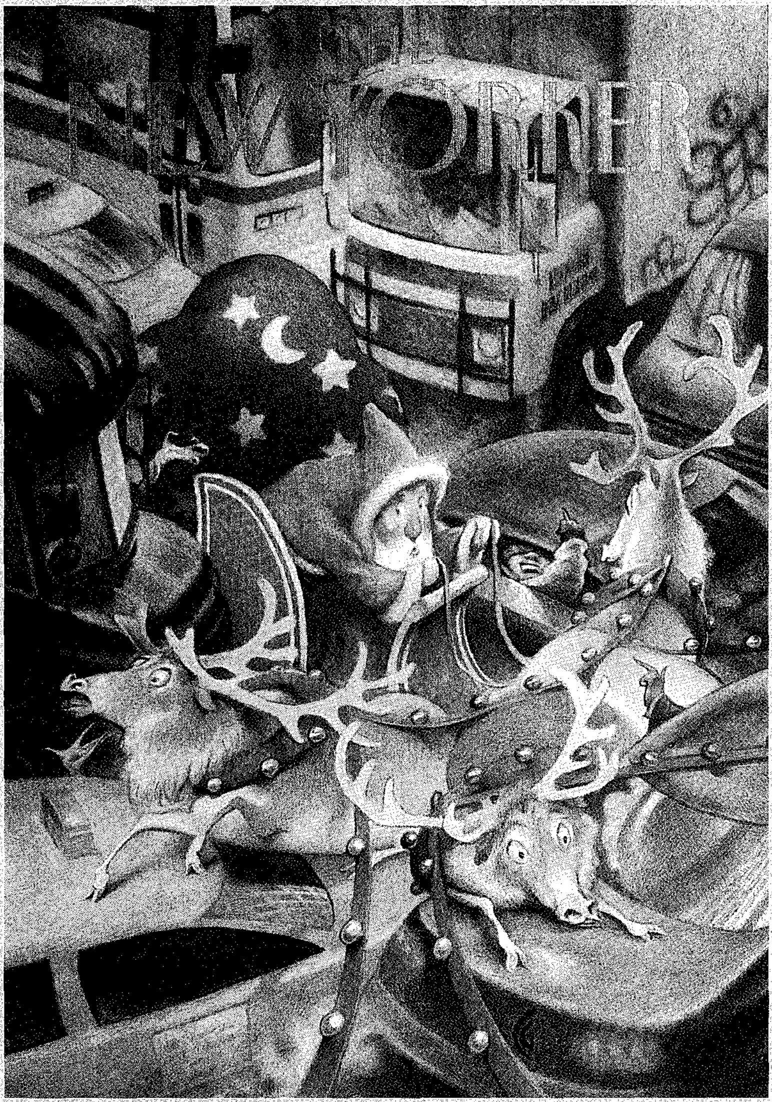

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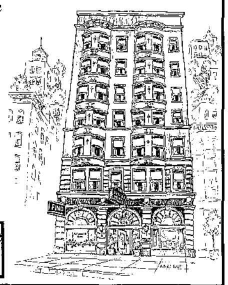

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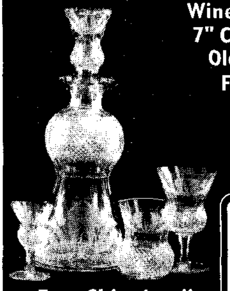

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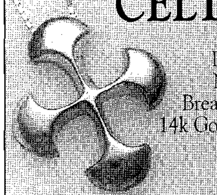

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BRIEFLY NOTED

THE MAGICIAN'S ASSISTANT, by Ann Patchett (Harcourt Brace; $23). "Parsifal is dead. That is the end of the story." So begins Patchett's third and finest novel, with forty-one-year-old Sabine grieving over the death of her gay husband in a Los Angeles hospital. Sabine has been in love with Parsifal ever since she was nineteen, and first watched him pull rabbits out of his sleeves at the Magic Hat. She thinks she knows everything about him. But Parsifal's will reveals his most accomplished illusion: he was not a Dartmouth grad orphaned by a car crash in Connecticut but a former juvenile delinquent from Nebraska, with a family that's alive and well and anxious to meet his widow. Patchett's lush and suspenseful story is also a portrait of America, which—with its big dreams, vast spaces, and disparate realities lying side by side—proves to be the perfect place for miraculous transformations, including Sabine's own.

PANTHER IN THE BASEMENT, by Amos Oz, translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange (Harcourt Brace; $21). It is Jerusalem in 1947, during the final days of the British mandate in Palestine, and Proffy, a twelve-and-a-quarter-year-old Jewish boy, is leading a double life. In his parents' eyes, Proffy (short for Professor) is a word savant. By his own definition, he is second-in-command of the underground organization F.O.D. (Freedom or Death), for whose noble cause he scatters bent nails and composes war slogans like "Perfidious Albion, hands off Zion!" Proffy's identity as an eloquent militant is threatened, however, when his compatriots charge him with treason for befriending a British policeman, and he is forced to reëvaluate the implications of the word "enemy."

THE BOOKSHOP, by Penelope Fitzgerald (Houghton Mifflin; $10). This novel is proof that any subject written about with wit and sensitivity—here, a bookstore opened by a middle-aged widow in England on the verge of going mod—can pack a wallop. In Fitzgerald's quaint, damp seaside town, jealous shopkeepers, obstructionist lawyers, and a competitive member of the gentry are among the casually and incurably wicked. But it is the people who care for kindness and courage, and—of course, books—who generate the ache this short novel leaves you with.

LOST MAN'S RIVER, by Peter Matthiessen (Random House; $26.95). In the Florida Everglades at mid-century, Lucius Watson, who has spent most of his life on the move, returns home to try to separate the truths from the myths of his father's killing, forty years earlier. A good part of Matthiessen's sprawling, uneven novel comes straight from the characters' own mouths, but his ample skills as a naturalist and a journalist are in evidence, too. The Watson story is bound up in the landscape and the bloody history of the region, where gator poaching has given way to gunrunning, and where, nearly a hundred years after Reconstruction, racism is still as firmly rooted and as common as mangroves.

A BLESSING ON THE MOON, by Joseph Skibell (Algonquin; $21.95). In this fabulistic first novel, which is as magical as it is macabre, the moon has fallen from the sky after the Jewish citizenry of a small town were shot by the Nazis. One of the victims is the respectable Chaim Skibelski, the narrator's great-grandfather, who is fated to roam the countryside as a frustratingly corporeal spirit. In fifty years of wanderings, he has an affair with a Gentile girl whose family has moved into his home; he receives guidance from a squawking crow that was his rebbe; and, in the book's eeriest turn, he is reunited with his family in a four-star hotel that turns out to be more like Dachau than like the Ritz.

PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS, by Allan Gurganus (Knopf; $25). Three young people settle in downtown New York to be geniuses: Robert Gustafson, hyperbolically beautiful, composes concert music; Angelina Byrnes paints; and Hartley Mims writes fiction. Angie and Hartley adore Robert, who is usually otherwise engaged; two of the three die of AIDS, and one survives to tell the tale. Alas, there's not much to it. While the novel is accurate about the general qualities of careerist bohemian (and gay) life, its three hundred-plus pages are almost devoid of dramatic incident. Instead, they offer extravagant verbal arias that become valentines to people we don't get to know or love.

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF ODYSSEUS ELYTIS, translated from the Greek by Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris (Johns Hopkins; $49.95). From the age of seventeen, in 1928, when Elytis was "shocked" into poetry by the discovery of the Surrealist Paul Éluard, to his 1979 Nobel address, "in the name of luminosity and diaphaneity," this Greek poet explored a personal yet political aesthetic. By developing a self-expressiveness rooted in the heroic, he forged a connection between pre-Classical Greece and contemporary culture, and became his country's Yeats. Against a backdrop of militarism and fascism, Elytis sang, "Kiss me sea before I lose you"—a song that readers worldwide are still humming.

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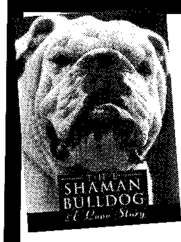

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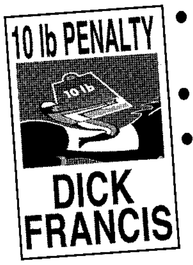

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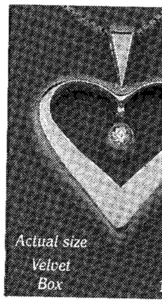

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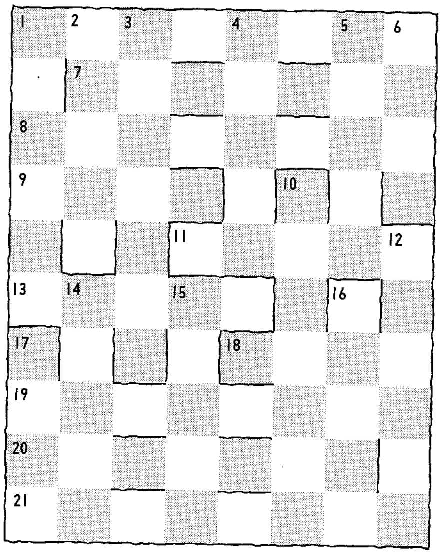
NO. 27 BY PATRICK BERRY



ACROSS

1 Star skiers at rocks (8)
7 Problem acquiring a piece of Intel computer company (7)
8 Criminal finally caught by choppers on call-in TV show (8)
9 Interrupt passage from church altar (4)
11 Emitted a low tone in conversation (5)
13 Winchester's last seen in Col. Potter's camp, in Swamp (5)
18 Rotten apple turned pitch black (4)
19 Write a book based on Free Love 'zine (8)
20 Judge: "No place for sinners" (7)
21 Write label on U.S. government building (8)

DOWN

1 "Traveling Man" the song (6)
2 Hares destroyed crop (5)
3 Planter's tools fix trellis (7)
4 Relationship of air to ground (5)
5 Push borne by pushover (5)
6 Family dog's face is friendly (4)
10 Flying in air, flying in air (7)
12 Express love for Dorothy before much time (4,2)
14 Quote a mortgage separately (5)
15 He appears in TV film (5)
16 Arizona secured by knockout round buzzer? (5)
17 Cut tailor's items up (4)

• •

The solution to puzzle No. 26 appears on page 79. For a free copy of "The New Yorker's Guide to Solving Cryptic Crosswords," please send your fax number or a stamped, self-addressed envelope to "Solvers' Guide," The New Yorker, 20 West 43rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036.

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SHOUTS & MURMURS

DRIVEL

BY STEVE MARTIN

Dolly defended me at a party. She was an artist who showed at the Whitney Biennial, so she had a certain outlook, a certain point of view, a certain understanding of things. She came into my life as a stranger who spoke up when I was being attacked by some cocktail types for being the publisher of *The American Drivel Review*. It wasn't drivel that I published, she explained to them, but rather the *idea* of drivel.

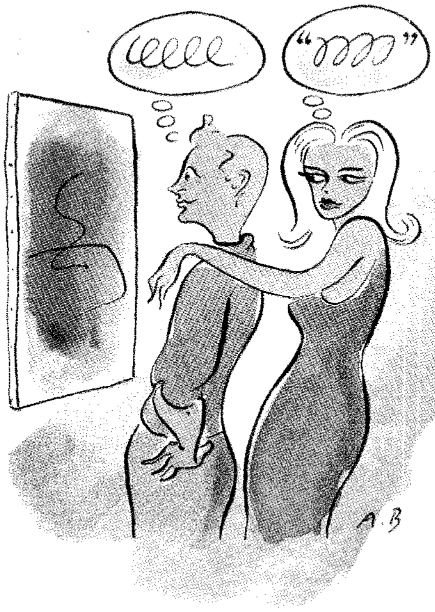
Later in the party, we paired off. She slouched back on the sofa with her legs ajar. I poured out my heart to this person I'd known barely ten minutes: I told her how it was hard to find good drivel, and even harder to write it. She understood that to succeed, one must pore over every word, replacing it five or six times, and labor over every pause and comma.

I made love to her that night. The snap of the condom going on echoed through the apartment like Lawrence of Arabia's spear landing in an Arab shield. I whispered passages from "Agamemnon's Armor," a five-inch-thick romance novel with three authors. She liked that.

As the publisher of *A.D.R.*, I had never actually written the stuff myself. But the next morning I sat down and tossed off a few lines, and then nervously showed them to Dolly. She took them into another room, and I sat alone for several painful minutes. She came back and looked at me. "This is not just drivel," she exulted. "It's *pure* drivel."

That night, we celebrated with a champagne dinner for two, and I told her that her skin was the color of fine white typing paper held in the sun and reflecting the pink of a New Mexican adobe horse barn.

The next two months were heaven. I was no longer just publishing drivel; I was writing it. Dolly, too, had a burst of creativity—one that sent her into a splendid spiralling depression. She had painted a tabletop still-life—a conceptual work, in that it had no concept. Thus the viewer became a "viewer," and looked at a painting, which became a "painting." The "viewer" then left the museum to "discuss" the experience with "others." Dolly had a way of taking an infinitesimal pause to imply the quotation marks around a word. (She could also indicate italics with a twist of her voice.)



Not wanting to judge my own work, and not wanting to trust Dolly's love-skewed opinion, I sent my pieces around and had them rejected by at least five magazines before I would publish them in the *Drivel Review*. I was disappointed when *Woman's Day* accepted a short story I'd written about Gepetto's Handmaiden, but, looking back, I guess I secretly knew that it was good. Dolly kept producing one art work after another and selling them to a rock musician with the unusual name of Fiber Behind; it kept us in doughnuts, and he really seemed to appreciate her work.

But then our love was extinguished quickly, as though someone had thrown water from a high tower onto a burning dog.

Dolly came home at her usual time. What I had to tell her was difficult to say, but it came out with the right amount of effortlessness, in spite of my nerves: "I went downtown and saw your new picture at Dia. I enjoyed it."

She acknowledged the compliment, started to leave the room, and, as I expected, stopped short.

"You mean you 'enjoyed' it, don't you?" Her voice indicated the quotation marks.

I reiterated, "No, I actually enjoyed it."

Dolly's attention focussed, and she came over and sat beside me. "Rod, do you mean you didn't go into the 'gallery' and 'see' my 'painting'?"

I nodded sadly.

"You mean you saw my painting without any irony whatsoever?"

Again, I nodded yes.

"But, Rod, if you view my work without irony, it's terrible."

I responded: "All I can tell you is that I enjoyed it."

We struggled through the night, trying to pretend that everything was the same, but by morning it was over between us, and Dolly left with a small "goodbye" soaked in the irony I had come to love so much.

I wanted to run,
run after her into the night,
even though it was day.
For my pain was bursting out of me,
like a sock filled
with one too many bocce balls.

Those were my final words in the last issue of the *Drivel Review*. I heard that Dolly had spent some time with Fiber Behind, but I also knew that she had probably picked up a farewell copy and read my final, short, painful burst of drivel. I like to think that a tear marked her cheek, like a snail that has crept across white china. ♦

ADRIAN BELLESGUARD

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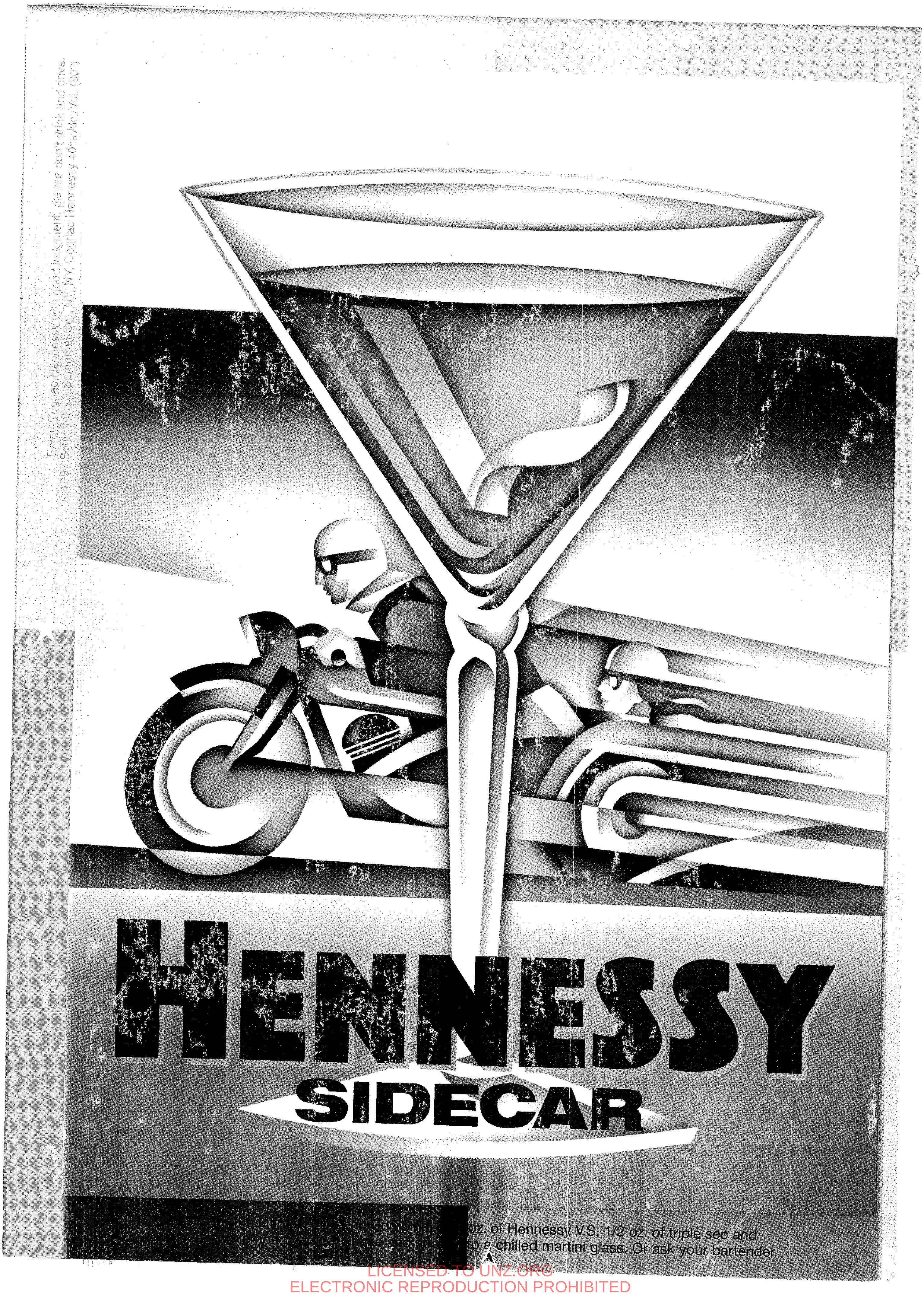

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